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Caravans by Night

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A ROMANCE OF INDIA

BY

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". . . . . Weave me a tale of Romance and Adventure—weave it on the loom of Asia; fine threads in the shuttle . . . . . that we who only read may feel the glare and glamour of those spicy, sweating cities; may feel the sheer spell of the stars and the far spaces at dusk . . . . . ."

THIS WORD-TAPESTRY IS WOVEN FOR

MY MOTHER

CARAVANS BY NIGHT

CARAVANS BY NIGHT

CHAPTER I

THE EDGE OF THE RIPPLE

IF you go to the Great Bazaar, which lies west of the Old Palace at Indore, you will see him sitting upon a cushion in his alcove-like shop, a very magnificent figure in flowing robes and gold-edged turban.

You will find him busy, whether you visit the bazaar in mid-morning or in the afternoon; or even after sunset, when lamps embroider the lacework of lanes and alleys.

He is an amiable fellow and he will talk for hours—of silks, of jewels (for in those luxuries he deals), or still more eloquently of Peshawar, where the blue peaks of the Hindu Kush let their lips caress the sky as though it were the cheek of some siren. But mention the barbarian with corn-colored hair, or the blue-eyed Punjabi, and he will suddenly become as uncommunicative as the tongueless *fakir* who sits before the Anna Chuttra and mutely pleads for alms.

For once, at a time not long past, a mysterious hand reached out of nowhere and touched him with two equally as mysterious fingers. The barbarian with corn-colored hair was one finger, the blue-eyed Punjabi the

other. And as swiftly, as inexplicably, as it came, this hand withdrew—but not without leaving its mark upon the memory of Muhafiz Ali, merchant and loyal servant of the Raj.

For ten years before that day when he felt the first impelling wave of intrigue his shop was a haunt for tourists and wealthy residents; for ten years he divided his days between salaaming to customers, cooking his meals over a cow-dung fire in the rear, and staring across the roadway with visible contempt at his despised rival, Venekiah, the Brahmin. For all those years Muhafiz Ali had hated Venekiah as only a Mussulman can hate one who wears the trident of Vishnu painted on his forehead. But of late there was another sore that festered deep in his heart and hour by hour fed his rancor with poison. His one son had dared the horrors of an unknown sea (oh, a thousand times larger than Back Bay, Bombay, the only water Muhafiz Ali can offer by way of comparison) on a troop-ship, and in a strange country, where monstrous metal things howled destruction and death, the parts of his only-born were buried—by Christian hands and in a Christian grave! . . . . While Venekiah's son, who never stirred from the bazaar when the sounds of India responding to the Sirkar's call rumbled from Kabul down to the Gulf of Manaar, lived and walked the streets to talk Swaraj and curse the Sirkar and everything bred of the Sirkar!

Muhafiz Ali came from the North, from Peshawar, and the sultry, throbbing heat of Central India dried up the life in his veins. He longed for the sight of his

brother-hillmen swaggering through the Bokhara Bazaar, at Peshawar; for the smell of camels (perfume to a Peshawari) clinging to the chilly dusk. He hoped some day to have enough rupees to board one of those terrifying, though thoroughly convenient, iron demons that he frequently saw panting in the railway station and ride back to Peshawar, where he would dwell for the rest of his earthly days in a house with a garden and an azure-necked peacock that strutted and shrilled like an angry Rajput.

Meanwhile, to this end he sat daily in his shop, not shrieking at prospective customers with "Please buy my nicklass!" like that offspring of the sewer across the way, but waiting with the dignity befitting a son of the Prophet for those who came to buy. And many came. For the fame of his silks (bales from Bokhara frail as spun moonlight and the raw sheeny stuff from Samarkand) had spread through the Residency and haunted every Memsahib and Ladyship who once allowed herself to be enticed into his felt-floored treasure-room.

But his fame lay not only in silks. In formidable chests in the inner room were many necklaces and ornaments—stones precious and semi-precious, and even paste. He was a lapidary and had once served in the establishment of a great jeweller in Delhi. It required but a single glance for him to find the matrix in falsely beautiful gems, or to appraise any sort of stone from diamonds down to chalcedony. Even his Highness the Maharajah had heard of his skill in cutting and setting jewels, and on two occasions had given him commissions.

On this particular day when the mysterious hand was very close, and Destiny had placed a chalk-mark upon a certain young woman and an officer of the empire, his hatred for Venekiah swelled to such proportions that it included every one; it quivered against the walls of his being, hot as the Indian sun that throughout the noonday blazed above the sweltering bazaar. Nor did his rage cool when, toward sundown, lilac shadows lounged in the street and a hundred-hued swarm jostled by.

The cause of his anger was a Sulaimaneh ring, which he wore at all times. Now it is an established fact in the social orbit in which Muhafiz Ali revolved that these onyx stones will repel devils; therefore, to lose such a talisman is to invite misfortune. And Muhafiz Ali had lost his Sulaimaneh ring. Furthermore, he suspected that his enemy, Venekiah, had stolen it from his finger while he slept—although for a Brahmin to touch a Mussulman is to defile himself. Yet he felt that that heap of offal, to speak in the vernacular of the bazaars, would suffer contamination to see him at the mercy of devils.

So he sat and glared, and swore all manner of Moslem oaths under his beard, and stopped hating only long enough to look toward the kindling west beyond which Mecca lay, and prostrate himself on a rug for evening prayer.

As he lifted his eyes they encountered a Sahib with corn-colored hair and beard; a Sahib who stood not a yard away; who fanned himself with a pith-helmet, and

looked upon the Mussulman's religious performances with a slightly cynical smile.

He was handsome, as these white unbelievers go, observed Muhafiz Ali. The eyes smiled with the assurance of one who knows a lot and is aware of his wisdom. Rather reckless eyes. His skin was tanned and the light hair and beard (beard because the word "Van Dyke" is not in Muhafiz Ali's vocabulary) made it more pronounced. White linens completed the picture.

Muhafiz Ali, his rage dissolving, salaamed.

"You 're Muhafiz Ali, the lapidary?"

The Mussulman detected in his speech a flaw that suggested he was not an English Sahib; probably American, or from one of those numerous countries behind the sunset, of which he had heard little and knew less.

"Not only a jeweller, Sahib," he returned, for he spoke English fluently, "but a dealer in silks, rugs—"

But the man brushed past him and entered the inner room. Muhafiz Ali rose and clattered after him in his loose Mohammedan slippers.

"Do you have jade?" asked the sahib.

For answer Muhafiz Ali lifted the lid of a brass-bound chest and drew forth a tray of necklaces—lustrous, creamy-green jade from Mirzapore.

"Not that kind," said the sahib, with a gesture (and had Muhafiz Ali known the meaning of the word, "Gallic" he would have applied it to that quick wave of the hand); "the clear sort."

Whereupon the Mussulman separated a string of gen-

uine *fei tsui* from several necklaces in another tray. The stones glowed deep parrot-green.

"Ah!" This from the white man. "Do you have pearls, too—imitation pearls?"

Muhafiz Ali, somewhat disappointed, produced a necklace of his finest false pearls, and the sahib examined it with the air of one who knew the difference between the nacreous sea-jewel and blown spheres of *essence d' Orient.*

"Are you alone?" was his next question.

"Alone?" echoed Muhafiz Ali. "Alas, O worthy lordship, my son, my only—"

"No, no!"—with that quick gesture and a significant look toward the rear door. "I mean, is there any one in the back of the shop?"

"Nay, Sahib!"

A germ of suspicion took birth in Muhafiz Ali's brain. What did this foreigner want?

"You have done work for his Highness the Maharajah, I understand," said the sahib, his eyes glittering like black chalcedony. "You reset several necklaces, and . . . you made a copy of the Pearl Scarf . . . for, well, for state purposes—did n't you?"

Muhafiz Ali answered in the affirmative, still suspicious. The sahib glanced over his shoulder into the swiftly gathering dusk.

"Could you make another copy, using stones like this?"

For some inexplicable reason Muhafiz Ali felt frightened. The eyes that looked so incisively into his did

not match the young face. He had seen the same expression, only more intense, in the eyes of a mad *mollah.*

"Could you?" pressed the sahib, "or, rather, *would* you? For an extra gift of thirty rupees?"

Thirty rupees! Muhafiz Ali's commercial instincts led him into planning. . . . But the Pearl Scarf. Why did he want a copy? The germ of suspicion grew and multiplied.

"Nay, Sahib!" he answered, his better judgment outbalancing the desire for money. "I do not remember how."

"That 's a pretty lie," interposed the man, with a laugh—a laugh that carried a cold undercurrent and made Muhafiz Ali shudder, inwardly. "You know the exact number of pearls in the scarf and how they are arranged; nine strands; with eighteen pearls in the neck-piece-clasp, each having a carat diamond inset in it. Come now—I will raise the extra amount to thirty-five rupees."

Thirty-five! The Mussulman's imagination took wings. He saw himself coming into what was to him fabulous wealth.

"The pattern is intricate, Sahib," he said doubtfully.

"I 'll risk it." Again that laugh.

Muhafiz Ali felt vaguely nervous. "I will have to think it over, Sahib," he announced.

What did he want with a copy of the Pearl Scarf? That query threaded back and forth across his thoughts.

"I am in the service of the Raj," the man confided quietly, as though answering the native's thoughts—

confided a shade too darkly. "The Raj wants a copy of it—oh, for reasons. . . ."

Ah! Muhafiz Ali understood now. The Raj! This handsome sahib was of that invisible army that comes and goes so mysteriously from Afghanistan to Ceylon.

"It is, O fountain of wisdom," he declared, with a sly wink, "as though I stepped from the dark into the light of the sun!" He motioned toward the door, through which Venekiah, seated across the way, could be seen. "I shall be as mute as the six-armed she-devil that yonder louse worships!"

There was a humorous gleam in the white man's eyes.

"Excellent! Make your price and come to me at the dâk bungalow at eight o'clock to-night. Bring a few necklaces for effect. I will be on the veranda. My name is Leroux Sahib."

He tossed several rupees upon one of the chests, and turned and went out.

Muhafiz Ali, reflecting that Allah looked with favor upon him, gathered up the coins. And this, after he had lost the Sulaimaneh ring! Pah! Ill-fortune, indeed! He scoffed.

He was so pleased that, a few minutes later, when a blue-eyed Punjabi inquired the price of a string of *ferozees*, he did not haggle over it but sacrificed the necklace for exactly what it was worth.

"Eight o'clock," he repeated to himself. And his own price. He was a loyal servant of the Raj, yes; but that

did not in any way affect his intention to charge the Raj well for his services.

He looked toward the shop of Venekiah.

"Brahmin dog!" he hissed in his beard. "Breeder of whelps!"

And he spat eloquently.

2

Night wove its shuttle across the sky, beading the dusk with stars. The Southern Cross lay mirrored in the Sarasvati and the Khan, and in the lake at Sukhnewás; it pulsed above the gardens of Lal Bagh, above Sharifa Street and those other narrow highways that vein the Holkar's capital; it peered down inquisitively into the gloom of the Great Bazaar as Muhafiz Ali, having finished a meal of curry and rice, quitted his shop and hurried toward the dâk bungalow.

That this Leroux Sahib had commissioned him to copy a jewel-pattern of the Maharajah's regalia no longer presaged evil in his mind. Nor did he seek an explanation. True, it mystified him. But there were some things one should not know. And, to him, the secrets of the Government were numbered among these. The Raj had banished the old order of things, for no more did princes sit in golden howdahs upon comparisoned state elephants; nor did they indulge, as of old, in the venerable pastime of pigsticking; they rode in automobiles and played a game on horseback with an absurd ball.... Muhafiz Ali had ceased long ago to wonder at the baffling

mechanism of the Government, and satisfied himself with the assurance that Allah did not intend he should understand. So Raj meant Riddle.

When he reached the dâk bungalow he found Leroux Sahib sitting upon the veranda. The white man led him inside.

"Well?"—this with a gleam of the black eyes.

"I will do it, O cherisher of the poor."

"The price?" The Mussulman named an outrageous figure—and held his breath. The man inquired:

"How long will it take?"

"Seven days; perhaps less."

The sahib frowned, tugged at his yellow beard.

"I must have it in five days."

"Impossible, O Burra Sahib!" A pause. "Unless—of course—"

A smile. "Not another rupee do you get, you old brigand!" he declared good humoredly. "And five days, I say. Settled? Thirty-five rupees extra when it is done, half the price in advance."

He drew from his pocket a wallet and counted out a number of Government of India notes.

"Remember, this is to be quiet," he cautioned. "I will call now and then to see how you are coming on."

As Muhafiz Ali made his way back to the bazaar, he congratulated himself upon getting so easily the price he had set upon the work, and regretted that he had not inflated it a little more. However, he was well pleased

with the day's business. He paused once on the homeward journey to place a four-anna bit in the bowl of an emaciated, ash-painted *fakir* who sat before the almshouse, and arrived at his shop in a state of excellent spirits.

He made a light and opened the chest in which he kept his necklaces. The instant he saw the top tray he detected a flaw. Unlike most merchants, he was very careful in the arrangement of his necklaces; in one tray were agates, in another blue sapphires; thus with all his beads.

And a string of creamy-luster Mirzapore jade lay in the tray with the clear, deep-green *fei tsui.*

A cold suspicion uncoiled in his brain. He stood motionless. This could mean but one thing: some one had entered his shop while he was away. He quickly counted the necklaces. None were missing. Nor did a hasty inventory of the lower tray show that anything had been removed. The other chests were under the protection of European padlocks.

Who had entered his shop, and why? Nothing had been stolen. The door was locked. . . . . But the rear! Ah! The court! Why had he not thought to barricade that also against thieves? But had a thief disturbed the beads? A thief would have taken them. After all, was not it possible that he had placed the necklaces in the wrong tray? Possible, but not probable. No, he was certain a hand other than his own had dropped the jade from Mirzapore in with the *fei tsui* stones.

Yet, he told himself, he had not been robbed. So why

be uneasy? But he could not rid himself of the uncanny suspicion that devil-business was afoot. He would feel more secure had he not lost the Sulaimaneh ring.

Upon an impulse he went to the door and peered into the street. The shop of Venekiah, the Brahmin, was dark. From a nautch-house close by came the muffled throbbing of tom-toms—a restless pulse of the night. A man in a Punjabi head-dress lounged under a rheumy incandescent further along the dim street.

Muhafiz Ali turned back, gravely troubled. He locked the door.

Of a certainty devil-business was afoot.

3

A film of dust wavered over the bazaar and introduced a drowsy golden effect into the mid-afternoon atmosphere. Few human beings ventured forth in the glare. A half-naked *bhisti* splashed water over the dusty roadway; at one corner a street-juggler sat with a torpid python coiled in his lap.

Muhafiz Ali, absorbed in utter languor, squatted upon a brocade of light and shadow woven by the sunlight that filtered through the dust-laden leaves of a tree outside his doorway and watched a green-bronze lizard drowsing upon the flagstones. The slumberous atmosphere of the bazaar, the mingled odors of fruit, fish and cologne, held no portent of the thunderbolt that very shortly was to jar Muhafiz Ali out of his peaceful sphere.

Five days had passed since he visited Leroux Sahib at the dâk bungalow. The copy of the Pearl Scarf was fin-

ished; it lay in a chest in the inner room. He had despatched the son of Khurrum Lal, the fruit vender, with a *chit* to the sahib telling him this, and the sahib had answered that he could call after nightfall.

Muhafiz Ali felt singularly relieved. For the past few days the Mohammedan equivalent of the sword of Damocles had hung over his head. The white man had called several times, and on each occasion the sight of him reassured Muhafiz Ali, but after his departure the native invariably relapsed into a state of nervous anticipation.

Now it was done. To-night the sahib would call and he, Muhafiz Ali, would settle back into an untroubled existence—many rupees the better. He felt peace upon him already. So he sat in the doorway of his shop and contemplated the green-bronze lizard, and breathed, almost with relish, the mingled odors of fruit and fish and cologne.

Muhafiz Ali had in him the makings of a psychic. He anticipated happenings with amazing accuracy. Therefore, when a shadow fell upon the roadway in front of him and he looked up to see Mohammed Khan, the money lender, he felt a pall descend upon him. Mohammed Khan, bearded and turbaned to exaggeration, frequently came to indulge in bazaar gossip. With a word of greeting, he sank upon the doorstep beside his brother-Mussulman.

He had startling news this day. Sadar Singh, who belonged to the Indian Escort of the Agent, had come to pay the fifteen rupees he owed him, and Sadar Singh, who never lied, had that very morning heard the Res-

idency Surgeon talking with the Commissioner Sahib. The substance of their conversation was that there had been a robbery at the palace. The vaults had been looted of the state treasures. The famous Peacock Turban was stolen. . . . And *the Pearl Scarf.*

Muhafiz Ali's brain did not function normally for some time after this announcement. He felt frightened—nauseated. The Pearl Scarf stolen. Suppose the copy was found in his possession, and the police, who had strange ways, connected him with the robbery? The house in Peshawar dwindled; he saw the jail looming before him. He was innocent, but how could he explain? He remembered vividly the incident of the jade necklace. Could it be that Venekiah, that mountain of corruption, had spied upon him? . . . . O Allah, Allah, he wailed in silence, it was written that his lot should be misfortune from the moment he lost the Sulaimaneh ring!

Inwardly, he writhed while Mohammed Khan talked on. He was in no mood for more gossip, but Mohammed Khan stayed—stayed until late afternoon when little spirals of dust began to rise from the street, when clouds materialized out of nowhere and blotted out the sun.

After Mohammed Khan took his leave, Muhafiz Ali tried to reason with himself. The sahib had said the scarf was for the Raj, and was not that assurance enough? No. And he strove to press behind the veil and find an explanation for the affair; but his Kismet decreed that he should be a pawn, and he dug at the mystery in vain.

A dark sky, threatening rain, hastened the dusk; and when, one by one, lights appeared in the street, like yellow sentinels, Muhafiz Ali uttered a sigh of relief and rose and entered the shop. A moment later he heard a soft patter and inhaled the fresh, cool smell of rain upon dusty air.

"Please buy my nicklass!" shrilled Venekiah's voice, and he looked over his shoulder to see Memsahib clatter by on horseback.

Behind her walked a man in a Punjabi head-dress, swinging along at a leisurely gait despite the rain.

4

The usual heavy downpour following a break in the monsoon drenched the bazaar. It came with a high wind, and doors strained at their locks and windows rattled as legions of rain rode through the streets. The torrent rumbled upon tin roofs and roofs of corrugated iron; reduced the dust in alleys to mud; lashed the thirsty, sun-scorched trees.

Muhafiz Ali sat on a cushion in the inner room of his shop with a copy of the Koran open in his lap, more intent upon the eerie sounds than the book. Frequently his eyes left the pages and sought the door as gusts of wind smote its panels, and when sudden draughts made the lamp-flame flicker and sent the shadows shuddering over the walls, a chill dread spread through him. Not until that accursed thing of imitations had been taken away would he feel safe. Surely the devils were hard besetting him for losing the Sulaimaneh ring!

The door shook—as though impatient with the lock and hinges that held it. Outside, the storm wrung wails and groans from the bazaar. Again the door rattled, furiously.

Muhafiz Ali set aside the book, rose and crossed the room. He unlocked the door. A spray was blown into his face. No one was there. Rain poured over the street-lamps in gauzy, iridescent ribbons; it wove spumy lace upon the black roadway and trailed, fuming, into the gutters.

He shut the door and locked it. He had taken no more than two steps before a pounding brought him to a halt. He stood there for a moment, tense; then turned and pressed his lips to the crack of the door.

"Leroux Sahib?"

Faintly, from out the chaos of sounds, came—"Yes."

He turned the key. The door opened violently and slammed behind the drenched figure of the yellow-bearded sahib. Water dripped from his helmet; streams of moisture trickled down his rain-cape and gathered in pools upon the floor.

"Allah be praised!" Muhafiz Ali murmured fervently.

Leroux Sahib flung aside his cape, and the native saw that he carried a flat package under one arm. The white man shook the water from his helmet and mopped his face with a khaki handkerchief.

"Mother of God! What a night!" he exclaimed, smiling grimly. Then: "Is it ready?"

Muhafiz Ali hastily opened one of his chests and removed several trays. The sahib joined him. His eyes

shone feverishly as the Mussulman drew forth a thing that tinkled musically. Strands of nacreous spheres reflected a soft radiance from the lamp; luster of cream-colored satin. The imitation diamonds that inset the clasp burned like star-splinters.

Leroux Sahib swore under his breath and chuckled; swore in a tongue Muhafiz Ali did not understand.

"What a joke! What a colossal joke! And they think it is for them. . . . *Bon Dieu!*"

The door rattled; the lamp-flame rippled threateningly.

"I shall place it in a tin box, Sahib," Muhafiz Ali said, for the sooner the thing was gone the sooner he would feel at ease. "See, a box no larger than the one you carry."

He moved the lid. Pearls rattled coolly. Meanwhile, the sahib counted out several banknotes.

"Count them," he instructed as Muhafiz Ali handed him the tin box, wrapped and tied.

The Mussulman obeyed. The door shook again. A sudden burst of wind almost carried the notes out of his hand. The lamp gasped. A slam followed.

Muhafiz Ali looked up quickly to behold a strange tableau—a tableau that for the while suspended all thoughts from his brain and drew from his limbs the power to move.

A man had entered—a blue-eyed Punjabi. The face was vaguely familiar, and Muhafiz Ali's memory groped. . . . A string of *ferozees*. . . . The Punjabi stood with his shoulders pressed against the door, his feet planted wide apart. His soaked garments clung to his

body; his turban dripped water into his eyes. But that did not quench the fire in them. How they burned! Blue sapphires! In his hand he held a thing that glittered like an evil eye.

Leroux Sahib had swung about. His feet, too, were planted well apart, as though he were steadying himself for an impact. The muscles of his throat stood out like white cords in the shadow of his beard. There was a hard gleam in his eyes; more than ever they resembled black chalcedony.

Afterward, Muhafiz Ali never quite remembered how it all happened. At the time he was too stupefied to observe details. The blue-eyed Punjabi laughed. It was a challenge. Leroux Sahib, suddenly smiling, answered it; lunged toward the lamp. The ring of shattered glass—and darkness wiped out the scene. Followed the thudding jar of muscle and bone against yielding flesh; swift, staccato breathing. The door was flung wide. Muhafiz Ali, crouching in a corner, saw a figure faintly silhouetted in the door-frame, an amorphous shadow upon the paler darkness of the street. It vanished. Another figure lurched out after it, and was swallowed by the storm.

Energy flashed into the Mussulman. He ran to the door. The incandescent lamps gleamed through a crystal curtain of rain. The street was deserted. For a moment he stood there, shivering. Then he shut the door; locked it; lay weakly against the panels. When he had recovered, he groped his way to where he knew

a lantern hung. He lighted it, and a mellow radiance played upon bits of broken glass.

He rapidly counted the banknotes. Satisfied, he returned to the door and pressed his ear to the crack. Only the slush and drench of rain. He shivered again.

Whither had they gone, this Leroux Sahib and the blue-eyed Punjabi? Their eyes! Black chalcedony and blue sapphires! The Punjabi had a pistol. . . . Over imitation pearls! Strange were the ways of these white barbarians, stranger still the ways of the Raj. On the morrow would the police come and ask him all manner of confusing questions? Or had the hurricane spent itself? Was this the last he would ever see of the yellow-haired Sahib or the Punjabi?

He turned back, looking half abstractedly upon the gleaming particles of glass. He shivered for the third time. Devil-business!

And so the gods, having no further use for Muhafiz Ali, merchant and loyal servant of the Raj, left him to wonder at the source of these ripples that had touched him; left him to grope behind the drop that had suddenly fallen upon this bewildering interlude; left him to dream of the house in Peshawar and the azure-necked peacock that strutted and shrilled like an angry Rajput.

CHAPTER II

DELHI

SEVERAL days after Muhafiz Ali delivered the imitation Pearl Scarf to the sahib in Indore, the young woman who was marked of Destiny sat in a first-class carriage of the East Indian Railway, her attention divided between a green vellum volume propped against a gray-clad knee and the sun-blistered scenery that unreeled past the window.

An elderly gentleman from Devonshire who occupied the same carriage found himself wondering why his eyes invariably returned to the girl. This particular gentleman was past youthful sentimentalizing and not yet in those riper years when age casts regretful glances over its shoulder; therefore, being no psychometric, it puzzled him that this girl should compel his gaze. Was it the hair, in whose bronzen waves a slantwise ray of sunlight ignited little glints of red-gold? Or the white throat, full with young maturity? Suddenly she looked up, and he fathomed the secret of magnetism. Brown eyes that brought to mind a deep, rich wine held to the light—or poplar leaves just before snow. He felt something of cathedral-largeness behind those eyes, something vital and alive yet intensely spiritual. The warm

strength of sunlight in great forests; tapers in altar-gloom. These things were there. And the gentleman from Devonshire thought of a daughter in Britain and smiled to himself, and forgot hot, heart-aching India.

The lights which he had glimpsed in the girl's eyes were the very beacons that had drawn her across leagues of water—lights that were first kindled in some voyaging ancestor whose frigate dropped anchor off old New Orleans, in the gilded days of Bienville; that grew dim in the tiresome process of heredity, and flamed anew, generations later, in this girl who sat in the railway carriage —lights that were almost smothered by the snuffers of Aristocracy and Tradition.

For Dana Charteris came of a Louisiana family whose name was as old as the state itself, and who lived in a great, pillared house and had black servants and drank blacker coffee. Custom and pride and chivalry were the goddesses of the family penetralia, and debt maintained the vestal-fires. Her father was called "Colonel" for the same reason that no less than one third of the gentlemen of his plane were given that title. Her mother, who carried an air of fragrant and faded aristocracy, read Cable and regarded him as some subaltern's wives in India regarded Kipling. And her brother, Alan—Dana hardly knew Alan. When his name was spoken in the house, it was in a hushed voice. They called him "black sheep," but Dana could never associate dark fleece with the slim boy she remembered. Alan ran away when little more than fifteen—ran away to sail the Seven Seas and to find the end of the rainbow.

Every few months letters came from him, bearing postmarks that were, to her, stamps of glamour.

In her eyes her brother wore the mantle of Jason. He rambled in all manner of weird places in his quest for the golden prize. This, while she grew in an atmosphere of sweetly-musty traditions! Before she went off to boarding-school her days were divided between the piano, paddling indolently in warm bayous—sometimes alone, sometimes not—and riding a black mare. But in the quiet, breathless nights when an army of stars thronged the sky, and from down the river came the soft crooning of a Creole song, she dreamed of enchanted lands beyond the horizon.

But the voyaging ancestor and the argonaut-brother were only partly responsible for her unrest. There was Tante Lucie, down in New Orleans. (Tante Lucie, who made one think of star-jasmines and all the romantic things that aura the Old South.) She had stories to tell, for a lover-husband had taken her adventuring. She had seen the Shwe Dagon and looked upon the Taj by moonlight. Her lover-husband was only a memory, as were the temple and the Tomb; but she loved to talk of them, sitting in her little court where the perfume of magnolias swam in the air.

Dana's father died just before her eighteenth birthday. In the years following, her mother no longer read Cable; she sat and dreamed of her argonaut-son and of the "Colonel." And Dana almost stifled her desire to cross the seas. For ominous sounds disturbed the quiet of Bayou Latouche; there were bandages to be made

and books and boxes to be shipped to camps. During that period the letters from Alan were infrequent and from Mesopotamia.

But the interlude of khaki passed, and Bayou Latouche sank back into its stupor. Again in the starry silences Dana listened to the crooning of Creole songs down by the river and dreamed of a world beyond the dawns and dusks. She was alone then; her mother went during the interlude, and Tante Lucie no longer sat in her court and talked of foreign lands. There were no ties; except money, as always. To keep up the house she taught music.

Then, one day, she heard from Alan. Burma, this time. He held a post with the Inspector of Police at Rangoon. He had a bungalow in the cantonment, he said, and any number of servants to wait on her, if she would sell the house at Bayou Latouche and come to him. In a short time he would have a "leave." They could meet in Calcutta and "do" India together.

India—together! Those words opened the dream-portals. After she read the letter she consulted a mirror and told herself that she was twenty-three and already in demand as a chaperone for the younger set. She went into the library and stood before the portraits of her father and her mother. She cried. And then, aware that the shades of the Charteris family had stern gazes fixed upon her, she sent a cablegram to Alan.

Once aboard the great ship, she felt no regrets; to look back upon the great, pillared house was like lifting the lid of a rose-jar: it brought the fragrance of things very

old and very faded. When she reached Calcutta, a young captain met her at Chandpal Ghat. He had a note from Alan. It explained that an urgent matter had taken him to Indore; he begged her to forgive him for not meeting her, but assured her she was in good hands. The second day in Calcutta she received a telegram from him.

"Meet me Delhi Friday," it ran. "Take express. Plan trip to Khyber."

To the Khyber! . . . . She left Calcutta that same day, and now, after a long journey through the prickly-hot United Provinces, she was speeding into the North. India, with its contrasts of filth and grandeur, had not tarnished under the touch of reality; the nearest she came to disillusion was in smoky, modern Calcutta. Now Tundla Junction lay behind in a shimmering heat-haze; ahead, beyond the roaring, sweating engine, was Delhi—Delhi, key to perished dynasties.

The engine's whistle shrieked. It sent a charge of excitement through her and she looked eagerly out of the window. Iron wheels rumbled across a bridge. Another shriek of the whistle. Brakes screamed, and the train drew up, panting, in the clamor and writhing heat of the railway station.

The gentleman from Devonshire opened the carriage door, and Dana, a grip in each hand, her heart fluttering against her breast, smiled at him and stepped into a torrid swarm. Her eyes searched the crowd. What would he look like? Suppose she did not recognize him! Vaguely nervous, yet happy, she al-

lowed herself to be carried with the human surge.

"Hello, there!" said a voice in her ear, and she turned quickly to look into a clean-shaven tanned face. (And the gentleman from Devonshire, who was passing, saw the brown eyes acquire a deeper, richer glow.)

"Alan!"

He was tall and slim, and the eyes that looked into hers were intensely blue, the blue of sapphires. . . . . The same boy, she told herself joyously, only more tanned and grown-up!

"Oh, Alan!" she gasped, as he held her at arm's-length, despite the crowd, then drew her to him and kissed her.

"Great Lord, how you 've grown!" he exclaimed.

She remembered saying something about not being a little girl always; remembered being led through the throng. Then they were in the street. Heat and noise and colorful confusion.

"I 've reserved rooms at a quiet place beyond the Kashmir Gate," he told her as he helped her into a carriage. "From the terrace outside your room you can look upon the battlements and the river." Then, with another smile, "I can't believe it 's you! Why, you 're positively beautiful! Lord, it seems a century, a whole century, since I was in Bayou Latouche!"

He removed his topi as they wheeled off and she saw that his hair was shot with gray above the temples. They seemed so absurd, those gray hairs. And how his eyes lighted when he spoke of Bayou Latouche! She realized suddenly, with a tightening of the cords in her

throat, that the search for the golden fleece had n't been all pleasant. In his voice, in his face and manner, was a thirst for home-talk. She understood how he needed her, there in his bungalow in Rangoon.

"Bayou Latouche is just the same," she said, placing her hand upon his. (She spoke with a faintly slurring accent that was unmistakable.) "Except, of course, so many have gone. . . . . the war. . . ." Pause. "I don't believe you 've changed a bit, Alan—you 're like that last picture you had taken before you left. Mother —how she adored you! If you could have seen the way she looked at that picture! Father, too."

He smiled soberly. She could see her father in certain of his features. A sudden fierce joy of possession ran through her. He was her's, this bronzed brother!

"I 'm glad you 've come, Dana." This solemnly. "It's been rather lonely out here. You know the climate has a way, once it gets a hold, of sapping up the energy and mummifying a fellow before his time."

Her hand closed tighter about his. "And there has n't been a girl, Alan?"

He smiled. "You 're the only one, Dana. . . . . I was sorry I was n't in Calcutta when you landed, but this game of sleuthing has its unexpected twists. That 's why I like it. Nothing very exciting ever really happens; it 's usually humdrum thievery and dacoity. A French rogue put in his appearance in Rangoon about a month or so ago—an international character; only goes in for big loot. Don't know where he was before

he turned up in Rangoon, but he vanished as queerly as he 'd come. The day I reached Calcutta I was in the station and I recognized him. He 'd peroxided his beard and hair! Heard him ask for a ticket to Indore, and I scented trouble in the wind. Of course, I should have had him arrested there, but I wanted to see what he was up to. I left the note with Bellingrath and took the next train."

Adventure! And he was talking of it in a matter-of-fact way!

"You caught him?" she urged.

"Has anybody ever caught Chavigny? No, he slipped through the net. And the nerve of him! He had letters to the Maharajah and the Agent! Used the name of Leroux. I dressed up in a Punjabi's garb—wanted to snoop around without arousing suspicion. I tracked Chavigny to a jeweller's shop the day I reached Indore and overheard him commission the merchant to make an imitation copy of the Maharajah Holkar's Pearl Scarf. After that I watched the jeweller, too. He—but I 'm boring you."

"Boring me!" She laughed. "My own brother masquerading as a native and shadowing a notorious thief! Go on!"

"Well, I waited, and the expected happened, only on a larger scale than I anticipated. The treasury was looted—*looted!* Thousands' worth of jewels! Why, the Pearl Scarf alone is valued at a *crore* of rupees, which is about three million, three hundred thousand in our money. And the Peacock Turban, too, cost a fabulous

sum! Yet, confound it, Chavigny didn't go near the palace the night of the robbery! Nor had he taken the copy of the Pearl Scarf from the bazaar! The night after the theft, I followed him to the shop. Gad, how it rained that night! He got the imitation scarf—but I lost him. We had a tussle and I snatched the beastly imitation, which I 'm keeping as a souvenir of my colossal blunder in not taking the local police into my confidence. Departmental jealousy; that 's the death of justice. Chavigny left Indore by automobile or carriage—don't know which—and boarded a north-bound train at Mhow garrison. The station-babu described him and said his ticket read to Delhi. And here I am."

"You 've notified the police that—Chavigny, isn't it?—is in the city?"

He smiled. "I didn't have to. About two hours after I arrived, I heard that Kerth—he 's the Director of Central Intelligence's best man—had got wind of Chavigny's presence and was trying to ferret him out. That relieved me of the responsibility of reporting Chavigny."

"And you still have the copy of the Pearl Scarf?"

"Yes."

"But is it right to keep it?" This with a flickering deep in the brown eyes.

"Oh, I 'll not keep it; only for a while. If I can get Chavigny, then—well, there 's no telling what might happen. Too, I 'd like to beat that devilishly clever Kerth. You see, Dana, this is a big affair, much bigger than I thought at first. The Secret Service is trying to keep

the lid on it, but of course it 's leaked out. On the same night the robbery occurred at Indore, similar robberies took place in several other cities. And in every instance it was royal loot! The Gaekwar of Baroda has one of the finest collections of diamonds in India, the famous 'Star of the Deccan' among them—and a rug, a *rug*, Dana, ten by six, made of pearls and rubies and diamonds! Think of it—and stolen! Scindia of Gwalior, the Rajah of Alwar, the Nawab of Bahawalpur, and, oh, others, too! And they all happened on the same night. Does it mean there 's a band of thieves at work, with Chavigny at the head? If so, why, great Scott, it 's the most colossal thing that 's ever been staged! But I can't understand how they intend to get away with the booty. The borders and the coast are closed as tight as a drum, and they can't dispose of the jewels in India."

Dana sighed. "To think of all that happening, Alan, just as I arrive! Would n't it be marvelous if—"

"If what?" he encouraged, smiling.

"Well, if I were to wake up and find myself in the midst of something of that sort; one of the players, not just an onlooker." Another sigh. "I 'd like to see a really notorious thief, Alan."

He laughed. "You may; for Chavigny's in a close quarter now. But here we are at the hotel."

The carriage drew up and a turbaned porter took her bags. The proprietor, an Eurasian, met them under the great front arch of the building and conducted them to their rooms.

"Oh!" gasped the girl, drawing aside the bamboo blinds.

The casement opened upon a stone terrace flush with the city walls, and out of the green and white chaos of Shahjehanabad, or modern Delhi, rose the gilded bubbles of several domes. Beyond a dark green jungle area, the Jumna shone dully.

"India!" she exclaimed. "Moguls and howdahs and mosques!"

"India! Thugs, snakes and abominable hotels!" scoffed her brother from the adjoining room. "Here 's the copy of the Pearl Scarf, if you care to see it."

As she turned, he stepped through the communicating doorway and extended a shallow box. When she lifted the cover a little gasp of astonishment left her lips. The cream-luster of pearls; red and blue gleams from paste diamonds!

"Why, they look genuine!" she cried; then shuddered. "There 's a terrible fascination about jewels, Alan. They always have a story. Murder and pillage!"

"Grease and dirt usually, in India," he interpolated with a smile, taking the box. "But let 's forget Chavigny and the round dozen Rajahs that are wailing over their stolen jewels. I promised Gerrish—he 's an old friend—we 'd dine with him this evening. Eight o'clock."

A few minutes later Dana unpacked her grips. Dear Alan! Her brother. After all those years. She wondered if it were not a dream, if presently she would n't wake up back at Bayou Latouche, or in Tante Lucie's

court, down in New Orleans, with Tante Lucie talking of foreign lands. . . . .

2

Night settled over Delhi. From the River Jumna to the Ridge, and beyond, tiny lights blinked at the shadows, and like a huge spirit-eye in the dusk the moon looked down upon the domes and minarets of the old Mogul capital. At the clubs electric punkahs fanned the air, ice clinked in frosted glasses and home-sick young officers read news-sheets from Britain. The network of narrow, constricted highways between Burra Bazaar and the Delhi Gate steamed and stewed, and heat and stench crawled beneath dirty eaves and balconies. South of the modern city, on the dead plain of Firozabad, thornbush and acacia rustled mournfully and ruined ramparts yielded up their nightly squadron of bats.

In his residence beyond the Civil Lines, Colonel Sir Francis Duncraigie, Director of Central Intelligence, C. S. I., and probably one of the most important men in the empire, sat alone in his writing-room beneath a mildly whirring fan, and sweltered and swore.

As a house-boy appeared like a white wraith from the dusk of the hall, he looked up.

"Well?"

"Did you call, O Presence?"

Sir Francis glared. "No!" Then, "But wait!"

A pattering noise sounded from the driveway, and

he rose and strode to the window, parting the draperies. What he saw, fantastic in the hazy moonlight, was a palanquin with drawn curtains, borne on the shoulders of four coolies.

"What 'n Tophet!" he exclaimed, for palanquins are rare in the present-day Delhi of cabs and motorcars, nor is it the custom of Mohammedan ladies, who ride in these picturesque conveyances, to call upon officers of the empire.

"If it 's anybody to see me, tell 'em I have an appointment and they 'll have to wait," he instructed briefly, turning back.

The house-boy disappeared, and Sir Francis resumed his seat. After a moment the boy returned.

"She says you have an appointment with her, O Presence!"

The colonel stared. "What!" Pause. "By George! Perhaps you 'd better show her in!"

He watched the doorway, and presently a white figure materialized. He rose. The woman wore a *bhourka*—the long cotton garment that Mohammedan ladies affect in public, and which leaves only the eyes visible.

"You wish to see me?" asked the Director of Central Intelligence.

The hood of the *bhourka* was thrown back . . . and the colonel, who while on duty hibernated under the armor of official dignity, came out of his shell. No man would question her beauty, many her type. The fea-

tures were long and narrow, and a warm gold, suggesting an Aryan strain, underlay her clear skin. The eyes, rather heavy-lidded, were baffling, and of a deep violet shade—like the peaks of the Khyber after the sunset gun at Jamrud Fort. Black hair clouded her face.

"You are surprised to see me—like this?" she enquired, indicating the *bhourka.*

Her voice was low and rich, and marked by a huskiness that was rare in that it was musical. Her English was flawless.

"Well, rather!" confessed the colonel.

"Am I late?"—as he drew up a chair for her.

"On the minute," he lied.

She smiled tolerantly. "Will you close the door, please?"

With a speed that would have made his subalterns gasp, he hastened to obey.

"Since I received your telephone call," he told her, settling himself behind the desk, "I have been all interest. What is it this time—more plots against the Sirkar?"

She made a grimace. "Plots spring up and die overnight! If I concerned myself with such minor occurrences, I should be eternally occupied. I told you I wished to see you regarding a matter of *importance.*"

She paused and he said: "Well?"

"What happened on the night of June fourteenth?"

He stared at her. "You don't mean—"

"But I *do.*"

He drummed upon the desk.

"You have not answered me," she reminded, after a moment. "What *did* happen on that night? Why not read me your files?"

He unlocked a drawer of his desk and removed a file cabinet. From the latter he took a sheaf of papers.

"The Treasure House at Alwar was robbed," he said, his eyes upon the papers in his hand. "The diamonds alone are worth ten thousand pounds, and—but you don't want me to go into detail, do you? Well, gems valued at three hundred thousand pounds, sterling, were spirited away from the Nazarbagh Palace at Baroda. Tukaji Rao of Indore lost his Pearl Scarf and the Peacock Turban. The treasury at Jodpur was looted. Scindia of Gwalior's pearls were stolen. Others who were robbed are: your cousin, the Nawab of Jehelumpore, the Nawab of Bahawalpur, the Rajah of Mysore and the Rajah of Tanjore." He halted, raising his eyes. "In other words, on the night of June fourteenth jewels worth millions of pounds were snatched away under the very nose of the Government, without leaving one single thread to grasp! If anyone had even suggested such a preposterous thing before, I 'd have laughed!"

"Then the 'Delhi Post' did not tell the truth this morning," ventured the woman, "when it said, 'the Intelligence Department has a valuable clue'?"

"Well, so we have," he admitted.

"Chavigny?"

He gave her a swift glance. "How did you know?"

She dismissed the question with a shrug and said:

"You agree with me, I am sure, Sir Francis, that these robberies are connected; that it is highly improbable to think for an instant that in nine cities thefts of famous jewels merely occurred simultaneously. As for this Chavigny—judging from his reputation he is clever enough to have done it. However, reflect upon the difficulties he would encounter. India is not like Europe. There is caste to consider. He is a white man. Furthermore, the jewels were stolen from state treasuries; from buildings, in some instances vaults, that are not easily accessible."

"Then you think it the work of some sort of organized band?"

"I think exactly as you do," she replied cryptically, "only I have foundation for my belief, while you are—rather, your department, is—well, romancing."

Silence fell. The man was the first to speak.

"I 'm to infer, then, that in your opinion Chavigny had nothing whatever to do with the robberies?"

She smiled. "Did I say that?"

"At least, you hinted that there is something rather big behind the thefts."

She continued to smile and leaned upon the desk, facing him.

"To come to the purpose of this call, Sir Francis. If you will give me four months—and a free rein—you have my word that I will recover every jewel that was stolen on the night of June fourteenth."

It was with difficulty that the Director of Central Intelligence smothered an impulse to smile and suggested soberly:

"Won't you be more explicit? This is—well, from my viewpoint, it seems rather incredible."

"I mean, with the aid of one of your men I will do what your Department could never accomplish. May I have him?"

"The whole of the Secret Service is at your disposal!"—magnanimously.

She gestured impatiently. "Woodenheads, all of them!"

Sir Francis almost gasped. "Even Euan Kerth?" he managed to ask calmly.

"I do not know Euan Kerth, but he is reputed to be the lion of your Department. He would more than likely prove unmanageable. No, Euan Kerth does not qualify."

He chewed his lip. "Really, won't you throw a little more light on the subject?"

"No," she replied in mellifluous tones, with her most distracting smile. "You recall what happened in the affair of Amar Singh, when your men investigated? *I* shall handle this after my own manner—or wash my hands of it."

Sir Francis' forehead wrinkled in an official frown.

"This is most extraordinary! Is that a—er—threat?"

"Dare one threaten the Intelligence Department?" she purred.

He drummed upon the surface of his desk again. His thoughts at that moment were none too pleasant.

"Well, what are your terms?" came at length from him.

She was aware that she was mistress of the situation, and she enjoyed the position.

"I wish to choose the man with whom I am to work," she began. "I am not to be spied upon by your agents; in fact, the first indication of any sort of surveillance will end our contract. The man I choose will not be permitted to communicate with you, or with anyone, until we have finished. He must obey me implicitly. If you agree to my terms, I shall name a meeting-place, and from the instant this man enters the house he is mine; he disappears from your observation completely until I give him back to the Raj. Meanwhile, you will follow up the clues you have; you will forget me, you will forget the man who is to help me—and at the end of four months I will keep my pledge."

Sir Francis concealed his thoughts under a smile, and well he did.

"You ask the impossible. Why, that 's preposterous!"

"You question my loyalty?"

A spark showed in the violet eyes—steel under the velvet.

"Your loyalty is not involved in this discussion; it is simply that you ask things that are unprecedented in the service."

"The happenings of June fourteenth are without pre-

cedent," she returned swiftly. "Come, Sir Francis, what are you losing in this venture? On the contrary, you gain much. I want no credit; when I have finished I vanish from the affair, completely. One of the stipulations is that my name must not be mentioned in connection with the work. Simply, your curiosity is piqued. And your masculine vanity suffers at the thought that a woman can do what you, with your hundreds of eyes, can not. Be reasonable. I give my word, a word that you have reason to know is always kept, that your man shall come to no harm. You do not question my loyalty, you say; then what reason for refusal have you? Simply that in the stale, musty annals of your Department such a thing has never been done!"

The Director of Central Intelligence leaned back in his chair.

"Do you know"—and he smiled as he said it—"I could have you—er—detained as a suspicious person, if I felt so disposed."

Her musical laughter rippled out. "But you do *not* feel so disposed, for what would it gain you?"

Their eyes met and there followed a quick duel. . . The man's smile was a sign of defeat.

"If you don't want a Secret Service man, whom *do* you want?"

"A man who has brains and imagination—and, besides those, honor."

"Name him."

"Major Arnold Trent of Gaya."

Sir Francis lifted his eyebrows. "He is a doctor."

"That is the way with you military men"—with a sigh. "If one is a physician, you think he knows nothing but what is taught in schools of medicine! I want some one whose brain is free of tiresome Secret Service rules."

The Colonel smiled. "You are a very resourceful woman," he declared.

"That means you accept?"

"It means I recognize your ability, and that I shall communicate with the Viceroy to-morrow and give you my decision as soon as possible."

She smiled her approval and rose.

"Then I shall not prolong this interview. Good night, Sir Francis."

She gave him her hand and moved to the door, where she halted, turning back.

"I nearly forgot," she said. "There is one other clause in the agreement. Major Trent must be kept in ignorance of the party with whom he is to work. To him you may call me—well, the Swaying Cobra." She smiled again. "By that name I was known when I danced on the Continent."

Then she departed, melting into the dusky hallway.

After a moment Sir Francis moved to the window and parted the draperies slightly. The palanquin was passing, swimming in yellow moonlight. He watched it until it lost itself in shadows.

"Now what the deuce!" he muttered.

He resumed his seat and searched several drawers until he found a black book; then he ran through the

pages, halting at: *"Trent, Arnold Ralph, Major, R. A. M. C. . . ."* He read the lines following the name; took the receiver from a telephone on his desk; called for a number.

"Kane?" he asked when he was connected. "Duncraigie. You might come out this way to-night. Important matter. Sarojini Nanjee just called. What! Surely you remember *her!* Connection of the Nawab of Jehelumpore; danced in London and Paris for a while. Half white, fourth Rajput, and the rest devil." He chuckled. "Thought you 'd recall *her.* I 'll be waiting for you."

He placed the receiver upon the hook and sat staring reflectively at the doorway where the woman of the *bhourka* disappeared.

"Hell-cat!" he said aloud.

Which may or may not have been the impression she intended to give.

3

An hour after the interview with the Director of Central Intelligence, Sarojini Nanjee lay back in a great cane chair in the living-room of her bungalow, idly watching the smoke from her cigarette as it spiraled upward and was rent into vaporous tatters by the electric punkah.

The room, like its occupant, was exotic. A Kyoto gong kindled a bright spot among softer tones—rare rugs, brocade hangings, and a tall lamp afloat on the

shadows, like an amber island. The woman seemed to melt into it, her very attitude expressing its utter luxury. Deep iris-hued eyes dreamed under heavy lids. Her skin glowed with a golden sheen, and the lacy folds of a negligee fell sheer from her slender ankles and embroidered the carpet with foamy white.

She had been thus for some time, her brain immersed in a languor, her thoughts propelled with as little mental volition as possible. She stirred only to flick the cigarette-ashes into a brass bowl at her elbow, or to arch one arm above her head in a gesture of complete abandon. A passing recollection of her call at Sir Francis Duncraigie's residence invariably caused a faint, inscrutable smile to slip into her eyes. But for the most part she did not burden herself with either thought or retrospection; merely sat in the dull, sweet stupor of semi-inertia.

A night beetle rattled harshly outside. The sound came to the woman as a sudden recall from her absorption. She placed her nearly burnt-out cigarette in the ash-bowl; stretched, rose, and struck the Kyoto gong. As the rich, deep-throated echo sank into a hush, the curtains on one side of the room parted and a servant in white garments and a blue turban entered.

"I shall retire now, Chandra Lal," she announced quietly. "You have your instructions."

"Yes, Heavenborn!"

"You remember the place—the room?"

"How could I forget, Heavenborn?"

"You will"—she hesitated—"cause no injury unless necessary."

"Nay, Heavenborn!"

"Stop calling me that!"—irritably.

Scarlet betel-stained teeth were revealed in a smile.

"Very well, Memsahib."

"You may go now."

"To hear is to obey, Memsahib!"

The blue-turbaned Chandra Lal slipped noiselessly between the curtains.

Sarojini Nanjee moved to a door in the other end of the room, paused tentatively and stepped over the threshold. The door closed behind her.

And as she left the room, Chandra Lal reappeared.

He stood motionless in the division of the curtains, listening; then crept softly to a desk in a dusky corner. He produced a key from his breeches; fitted it into a lock; opened a drawer. For several seconds his hands moved swiftly, silently through the papers within. After that he wrote a line on a small scrap of paper. This he folded and slipped under the edge of his blue turban.

Noiselessly he locked the drawer and recrossed the room. At the doorway he looked back. . . . . The curtains fell together behind him.

4

Dana Charteris sat before a mirror in her room at the hotel and released her hair from all restrain-

ing pins. It tumbled over her shoulders in ripples of gold; little bronze-tipped waves, rather reddish, glowed with soft fire under the searching rays of the electric lamp. The face that looked back at her from the mirror, a face framed in the shimmering copperish masses, had a lustrous pallor. She returned the stare of her own image solemnly and realized, not for the first time, that while the features in the mirror were those of a girl, there were hints of maturity. The fullness of the throat, of the lips, and the sympathetic, almost poignant expression in the brown eyes.

She sighed, then hummed a little tune as she ran a comb through the thick strands. The odor of tobacco floated to her from the adjoining room where Alan was making out a report. She liked the smell; it was clean and masculine.

When she had plaited her hair into two long braids, she slipped into a dressing-gown and pattered into her brother's room in bedroom sandals.

"Alan," she said, slipping her arms about his neck, "it 's so wonderful to be with you! Why, just think, two months ago I was teaching music in Bayou Latouche!"

He put his pipe aside.

"To-morrow we 'll ramble about the city, through the Fort and the bazaars," he told her. "And the next day—to Lahore."

"I always think of Lahore with a picture of *Kim* sitting on *'Zam-zammah'*."

He smiled. "Then to Peshawar and the Khyber. I 've an old friend at Ali Masjid Fort and he 's promised to take us through the Pass."

Then he rose, picked her up bodily and carried her into her room, placing her upon the bed.

"Good night; sleep tight!"

He kissed her, turned out the light and returned to his room.

Dana slipped out of her dressing-gown; flung it across the foot of the bed; dropped her slippers upon the floor. Then she lay back upon the pillows, watching the moonlight that streamed in through the open casement.

The wide-flung windows yielded a view of the sky and the white Indian stars. In her fancy she likened them to a string of jewels. Jewels. That word brought to her mind a picture of the looted treasurers of which Alan had told her. Gems. What fascinating things! Jewels of rajahs and maharajahs, the pomp and rust of pagan rulers! Diamonds stripped from idols' eyes, and rubies and sapphires pillaged from the vaults of ancient temples! She had heard stories of the pearl fisheries of Ceylon where stones were stolen and hidden in cobras, even in human bodies. . . . . India, mother of intrigue. She shivered.

She could not forget the copy of the Pearl Scarf of Indore. It haunted her. . . . Pearls. . . . Chavigny, a thief of international notoriety. . . . Alan's pen was scratching steadily on in the next room. The odor of tobacco was comforting. It made her forget the jewels of Ind; conjured in her mind a picture of the great,

pillared house at Bayou Latouche. And she was still thinking of Bayou Latouche, and hearing faintly the *scratch-scratch* of the pen, when she fell asleep.

5

Dana awakened with a start. Involuntarily she sat up in bed, staring drowsily about the room. It was buried in dusk. The moonlight, floating through the casement, crusted the floor with a band of pearl. As full consciousness wiped the threads of sleep from her brain, she wondered what had caused her sudden awakening. No noise, for silence shut down like a lid, made more intense by the sighing of trees beyond the stone terrace. The sounds of a clock on the dressing-table seemed to stitch the hush.

For a moment she sat there, vaguely uneasy; then swung her feet over the side and slipped them into bedroom sandals. Moving quietly to the dressing-table, she looked at the clock. After one. . . . Her sandals lisped on the floor as she crept to the window.

Delhi lay asleep in the breathless night. Temple, tower, dome and minaret swam in the moonlight, and in the jungle stretch by the river jackals were laughing hysterically. With a little shiver she returned to the bed.

Strange to awaken like this, she thought. The new surroundings probably. She sighed and settled deeper in the bed.

. . . . She was almost asleep when a shadow flitted across her vision. At first it seemed a part of the slum-

ber that had nearly overcome her, and she lay there contemplating the window-casement where it had passed until it was borne to her, suddenly, and not without a shock, that she was fully awake and the shadow was not a shadow, but a very substantial human form that had stolen by on the stone terrace. The realization drew her muscles rigid, and she lay motionless, listening to the hammering of her heart.

A faint scraping noise came from Alan's room. What was it, a footfall? An oblong reservoir of darkness outlined the doorway. She could see nothing. . . . She must move, must call her brother. But her body was locked in a temporary paralysis, her tongue dry.

Again the sound. Unmistakable. Some one was walking stealthily. The crackle of paper.

Her fright increased, swelled, became so acute that she could no longer endure it.

"Alan!"

It was not a scream; a whisper. She found that she could move, and she sat up.

From the next room came a series of thuds; bare feet on the floor.

"Damn you—"

She leaped out of bed.

A ripping sound. A groan. Another thud, heavier this time.

Dana reached the communicating door in a few steps. A quick intake of breath. Her hands closed upon the door-frame, tightened convulsively. Dimness swam vis-

ibly before her. Through the dark mist she saw a figure dart out upon the stone terrace and disappear.

Beside the bed, stretched full length upon the floor, was a white form.

She screamed. The dimness dissolved and she rushed to the body.

"Alan! Alan!"

She grasped his shoulders, dizzy, cold with horror. Involuntarily she drew one hand away and saw a dark stain upon her fingers. It seemed to glare out and strike her eyes. She fought against a gathering weakness; forced herself to feel his heart. Beating. But that white face! And how could she lift him to the bed, how—

Footsteps rang from the hall. Came a knock at the door; a voice penetrated the panels.

Dana rose, found the light-switch and turned it. The flood of yellow gave warmth and strength to her—showed her a blue coil in the middle of the room. Dimly she realized it was a turban cloth—probably torn from the intruder's head. She did not touch it, but unlocked the door.

The Eurasian proprieter stood outside, in a dressing-gown. Behind him was a dark-skinned porter. A door opened further along the hall.

"My brother!" she gasped, motioning toward the white form.

The Eurasian spoke to the porter. They entered and placed the unconscious man upon the bed. Oblivious

of the fact that she was clad only in a nightdress, Dana stood by, trying to collect her scattered faculties.

"If you will call a doctor," she said, "I 'll attend to him now."

"Yes, madam. I 'll have the boy fetch some water and smelling-salts from my wife's room. How did this happen?"

"I—I can't think—now," she returned dazedly. "Later. . . ."

The Eurasian said something, but she did not remember what it was; remembered only that he and the porter went out. A moment after the door closed she heard voices in the hall.

"O Alan!' she pleaded, bending over her brother. "Can't you hear me?"

Several minutes passed before he showed any symptoms of reviving; then he mumbled a few unintelligible words, and the lids drew back from his eyes.

"Dana!"—weakly. "He—took it—"

"What, Alan, dear?"

"The scarf—confounded imitation." He closed his eyes; opened them an instant later. "I 'll be all right," —with a smile. "Nothing serious. Don't mention the scarf, or anything about it. Just say—thief. . . . ." The lids sank over his eyes. "Imitation," he muttered. And fainted again.

. . . . The Eurasian returned shortly, with the porter at his heels. The latter carried a basin of water and several bottles.

"If you 'll allow me to attend to him," offered the

proprieter, "it will spare you much unpleasantness."

Dana nodded and sank into a chair, shivering.

Nearly an hour passed before the doctor arrived. Alan had regained consciousness, but fainted during the examination. Dana, standing beside the bed in her negligee, waited nervously to hear the decision.

"I don't think you have any cause to be uneasy," said the doctor, after what seemed an interminable time. "The wound is n't serious—only the muscles and tissues punctured—nothing internal. But I 'm going to suggest, rather, insist, that he go to a hospital."

"By all means," agreed Dana, very close to tears. "I want everything possible done for him."

The doctor smiled sympathetically. "Be sure we 'll do all we can," he assured her. "Now, if you 'll have some one fetch a basin of water, boiled, I 'll get at this dressing."

Close to dawn, after the doctor had departed and Alan was conscious, Dana went to her room to dress. At the doorway she paused—for the blue turban-cloth lay coiled upon the threshold where she had tossed it. Incidents of greater importance had crowded the remembrance of it from her brain. Now she stooped and picked it up, rather gingerly. Queer. For imitation pearls!

She lowered her eyes, suddenly, involuntarily—as though in obedience to a subconscious command.

On the spot where the turban-cloth had lain was a small scrap of paper.

Thus, having jested with a puppet at Indore and

given a thread into the hands of Dana Charteris, Destiny, capricious as the winds, turned toward the officer of the empire upon whom a chalk-mark had previously been placed.

CHAPTER II

A PIECE OF CORAL

SUNSET was spreading a fan of flamingo plumes above Meera, a native village to the northward of Gaya, when Arnold Trent (unaware that Destiny had been hovering over him since Dana Charteris found the scrap of paper, in Delhi, three days before) clattered out of the jungle and along the nearly deserted main street. At the council-tree, where the headman of the village sat and chewed betel-leaf, he drew rein, listening to a low, eerie wailing that came from one of the white-washed houses.

"It is Chatterjee," volunteered the headman. "His Ratanamma is dead, Dakktar Sahib."

Trent swung down from his saddle. "When did it happen, Ranjeet Singh?"

"Not an hour past, Dakktar Sahib."

Trent's eyes roved up and down the street. "Where 's everybody? Meera looks as if a plague had struck it."

Ranjeet Singh, who was a Jain, spat contemptuously. "Some vermin-ridden priests from Tibet are at the Sacred Bo-tree," he explained, "and the worshippers of Gaudama have swarmed thither, like flies to a dung-feast!"

Trent smiled slightly and moved toward one of the whitewashed houses, swinging along with the leisurely,

easy stride of one poised on well-controlled muscles. At the door he paused. It was dark within, and a breath of offal and man-reek greeted him. After a moment he saw, against the darkness, the pale silhouette of a white-clad figure. From this figure came the eerie wails.

"Chatterjee!" Trent called.

The silhouette ceased wailing long enough to quaver: "Dakktar Sahib!"

The Englishman, his eyes now accustomed to the gloom, strode over to a thong-strung bed and peered down at the form stretched upon it. Unable to see clearly, he struck a match. The tiny flare flickered upon bare brown skin. . . . . Trent swore.

"Stop that damned nonsense!" he commanded. "Chatterjee, you 've had some infernal *hakim* here again—against my orders!"

"My little Ratanamma, dove of my bosom, is dead!" wailed the man.

"Did you give her the medicine I left?"

"Yes, Dakktar Sahib! It was your medicine that killed her. The *hakim* said so."

Trent swore again. "I 've a notion to report you to the Karnal Sahib and have you taken up! You old murderer! Did n't you know better than to let some filthy, stinking *hakim* burn her stomach with a hot iron?"

The native was wailing again.

"Listen to me, Chatterjee," said Trent sternly, gripping the man's shoulder. "Who did this?"

"Your medicine, Dakktar Sahib!"

Trent shook him roughly. "Will you answer me—or. . . ."

"Your medicine, Dakktar Sahib!" insisted the man.

Trent released him, realizing the futility of pressing the question.

"Very well. I 'll report you to the Karnal Sahib and he 'll have you strung up by your toes!"

He left the house abruptly—followed by feverish, glowing eyes.

Out of Meera he rode, past the temple on the river bank and along the jungle-lined road toward Gaya.

Trent was angry. But his face gave no indication of it. Twenty-three years under a tropical sun (add the ten years at school in Britain and you 'll have his age) had baked his skin to a leather brown, and a third of that time spent in the army had taught him that impassivity is man's chief advantage—a citadel against the aggressive. He had, in the vernacular of the times, a "poker face"—the mask of those who share their secrets with few. In either mufti or khaki he was not particularly handsome, and this evening, after a day of work in viscid heat, he was almost ugly. Dust was ingrained into his skin, like an ocher pigment; his throat and brows were moist with perspiration. Yet there was about him something arresting and vital—a challenging strength that pronounced him a man's man. And he was. He talked with men; ate with men; lived with men; understood men. Scales that dip into earth-dust and swing again to regions of exquisite idealism—the eternal weight and counter-weight of

Self. That was how he defined them. And his definitions were usually metaphors. An idiosyncrasy. Give him a chair in a dim room with one of Beethoven's sonatas swelling in throat-gripping chords, or a pipe and congenial darkness somewhere close to the stars, and he was in his prime element.

As for women. . . . That there had been one—one or more—at some time in his life, nobody who knew him doubted; but it was the general opinion at Gaya and thereabouts that he was as little concerned with women as with anything else that habited the planet. Envious subordinates hinted that at one time or other he had run afoul some feminine reef. When these remarks drifted to Trent (and such remarks always do) he only smiled, for he had a generous supply of humor packed away under his impassivity. It was never known that he deliberately avoided women; it appeared that he simply accepted them as a matter of form, inevitable as waves on a sea, and sometimes as disastrous.

Only Richard Manlove, also an army doctor, who shared his bungalow, had penetrated beyond the outer-rampart of his seeming seclusiveness—"Dicky" Manlove whom Trent first saw out in dead Mesopotamia. Their friendship was a popular topic of discussion on warm afternoons when feminine Gaya gathered to perspire under one common punkah. So different, you know. . . . Young "Dicky"—a delicious boy . . . . and the major—oh, rather a decent chap, a human manual of Hindustani and all those other perfectly impos-

sible languages, but . . . . well, it 's so disconcerting not to know what a man is thinking, is n't it?

Thus feminine Gaya catalogued him, and thus he appeared—immobile—this late afternoon as he rode out of Meera.

His anger died as he trotted on, and by the time he came within view of his bungalow, built on the flank of one of Gaya's hills, he was watching, in a whimsical, almost detached manner, the fireflies dance and reel in the dusk. When he drew nearer, he saw a figure in a white dress leave his compound, a figure that paused at the diverging roads not far from the bungalow, and, after a slight hesitation, chose the branch in his direction. Instantly he indexed her as a stranger; no female resident would think of using the isolated Meera road after dusk.

She wore a pith helmet with a veil. The veil was lifted, but as he approached, she lowered it—curiously enough, he thought. He was certain she had come from his compound; therefore, when she was within a few yards, he drew rein.

"Your pardon . . . ." as he lifted his helmet. "Do you wish to see me? I 'm Major Trent."

She halted, resting one hand upon a tree-trunk. He caught the glint of a bracelet on her white arm, and, being a man to notice details, observed a design worked in heavy relief upon it—a design that, in the half-tone of the early night, was almost indistinguishable.

"No," came the answer from under the veil, in a voice with a soft, thrilling timbre. "No."

He was still studying the bracelet out of the corner of his eye, and he perceived that the intricate workmanship represented a king-cobra; its hood was lifted in bizarre relief. . . . A barbaric ornament for a white woman to wear, he thought.

"But, really," he persisted, "it is n't quite safe for you to go along this road. Beasts, you know."

A pause. He saw the dark pools of her eyes upon him.

"Thank you," she murmured. "I thought I was going to the dâk bungalow."

With that she turned and moved away in the direction of the metalled main highway.

"Now, that 's queer," he observed to himself, staring after her. "Anybody with even bad sight could see that this road. . . ." Certainly she was at the compound gate. Why had she falsified?

He removed his helmet and furrowed his hair—a characteristic gesture; then, still watching the woman, he jerked the reins and trotted toward the bungalow.

2

A native servant in a white cotton *chuddah* and turban switched on the light in the living-room as Trent entered.

"Has Manlove Sahib come in, Ganeesh?" asked the Englishman.

"No, Dakktar Sahib."

Trent placed his helmet upon the table and sank into a chair.

"I sha'n't want anything to eat, so you may as well go. If Manlove Sahib has n't eaten, he can go to the barracks."

As the native quitted the room, Trent, at a sudden thought, called after him.

"Ganeesh," he said, as his servant reappeared, "has anyone been here this afternoon?"

"No, Dakktar Sahib."

"Did n't a lady call a few minutes ago?"

The man answered in the negative.

"Hmm. Very well. That 's all."

Still puzzling over the strange woman, he removed a pipe and a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket, and when he had filled the bowl he lighted it. For several minutes he drew upon the amber stem, looking abstractedly into the whorls of smoke; then he picked up a brown volume from the table and opened it at a leaf that was turned under.

Here was another trait that Gaya had not discovered. Frequently when he was tired he turned to poetry—sometimes to books on the art-treasures and ancient lore of India, Indo-China and China—for relaxation.

His eyes followed these lines:

Star of the South that now through orient mist,
At nightfall off Tampico or Belize,
Greetest the sailor, rising from those seas
Where first in me, a fond romanticist,
The tropic sunset's bloom on cloudy piles
Cast out industrious cares with dreams of fabulous isles.

He rather fancied that passage. Fabulous isles.

His brain toyed with the thought. For, although he walked down among mortals, sheathing himself in indifference and impassivity, he kept, in secret, a ladder to the stars—a concession to return at will to a guarded kingdom of his youth, the dominion of Romance and Adventure. He would have dwelt in this kingdom, secluded from earth, but for a thorn that was fastened deep within him. This thorn had pricked him since that period of adolescence when first visions and aspirations stirred in his boyish brain and set him to dreaming of the future. It had goaded him relentlessly into achievement, against the will of his adventurous spirit. Strive as he might, he could not draw it out.

It was Ambition.

Because of it he had buried a dream that at odd moments returned and haunted him, like the poignantly sweet odor of lavender rising from packed-away treasures. Reckless, this dream, dangerous. To forsake the dull earth; drink freedom from the winds. A passion for the open spaces—to explore the fabulous isles. But the lure of uncharted seas and archipelagoes beyond the sunset, sheer and calling as they were, could not entice him to trample tradition. Ambition had won. And he beheld himself now, at thirty-three, a romantic soul armored in realism; at heart a boy who had never broken away from the age when flapping canvas and groaning timbers cause a queer clutching in the throat. His reckless impulses and desires were bitted and diverted into accomplishment. He was a success. But there were times, often in the dead of the night,

with the jungle solitude challenging speech, when he realized that, in his own eyes, he was a failure.

He sighed unconsciously, almost inaudibly, and his sea-green eyes softened to gray as he fashioned, extravagantly, a blue dragon in the tobacco smoke that coiled sinuously toward the ceiling; sighed, as he often did in the quiet of his own quarters where only the walls might hear.

His thoughts switched involuntarily to the present (and his eyes lost some of their grayness, for their color seemed to change with his moods) and focussed upon the communication he had received that morning. Under the precise military wording he sensed another element. Mystery. After all these prosaic years was he to be drawn out of his cocoon of medicines and gauze bandages and have his adventure? In all probability the affair would prove drab enough. Adventure? Well, hardly. Things of the sort set forth in the despatch were usually rather unpleasant. Yet it intrigued him. Blindfolded. And was not that it?

". . . . temporarily attached to. . . . Euan Kerth . . . . a woman called the Swaying Cobra. . . ."

Fragments of the communication filtered through his brain. Strange. From pills and antiseptics to that! It *was* leaving a cocoon! What a joke to tell Manlove. Dear old Manlove—this with warmth.

The sounds of walking in the compound announced the object of his thoughts. The footsteps drew nearer, crossed the veranda, and Manlove, uniformed and helmeted, entered.

"Rum day," he said. "Hot as Tophet; everything wrong."

Trent made no comment; only nodded.

"There 's a big shindy up at the Sacred Bo-tree," the other added. "Some Tibetan lamas are there. I stopped by with Herrick."

He took off his helmet, the removal revealing to the light a tanned, boyish face and a healthy thatch of hair; mopped his forehead and flung his headgear carelessly across the room. That was his way, to appear careless. But at heart he was not; he liked small boundaries (while Trent craved larger ranges), homely things. He looked forward to the time when he would come into possession of "Gray Towers," ancestral abiding-place of the Manloves. Of course, he did n't want his grandfather, more familiarly known as the Old Fellow, to die or anything like that; he was simply prepared for the inevitable: The Right Honorable Richard Auckland Manlove, sitting in the House of Lords and presenting Colonial improvement measures, for India in particular; no longer "Dicky" Manlove, irresponsible adventurer, but carrying the ponderous dignity of the name. . . . . It was all very impressive. . . . .

"Mrs. Dalhousie is giving a lawn party tonight," he announced, taking a chair. "Impromptu. She told me to drag you along, if you 'd come."

"Sorry," returned Trent. "I 'm leaving for Benares early in the morning. I 'll be occupied to-night. Orders from Delhi."

Manlove withdrew a cigarette case from under his

tunic, opened it, took out a smoke and placed it between his lips before he spoke.

"Deuce you say! Not transferred?"

"Temporarily detached; special service. You and Conningsby will have to take charge while I 'm away." He smiled. "Been reading the papers lately?"

Manlove lighted his cigarette, glancing furtively at Trent. The latter was staring into the blue haze of smoke, half humorously, as though he found something amusing in the vaporous clouds.

"Certainly"—thus Manlove.

"Anything new about the jewels?"

Manlove smiled to himself. He had n't lived in the same house with Arnold Trent for fourteen months without learning *something* about him. The old sphinx, he thought good-humoredly.

"Nothing important"—briefly. "However, I understand, from Granville, that the Department believes an international thief—Chavigny 's his name—mixed up in it."

"Wonder where Granville got that?"

"Oh, rumors are plentiful, especially at stations like this where everybody's chief occupation is talk."

"That all?"

Manlove nodded and said nothing, for he knew Trent.

"Have you approximated the value of the stolen gems?" queried the latter, then went on: "Millions of pounds! And have you wondered how the devil they 're going to hide the loot, or get it out of India? Such well known jewels can't be sold—"

"Unless they 're re-cut," put in Manlove. He smiled wisely. "By Kali and all the other deities, you don't mean that you, expert in cholera and dysentery, are about to—" He chuckled. "Well, I 'm damned!"

Trent moved to a desk in a corner of the room, unlocked it and took out a long, official-looking document. This he handed to Manlove, then resumed his seat. The latter unfolded it and let his eyes travel down the sheet.

"Has the heat gone to their heads at Delhi?" he demanded when he had finished. "Almighty God, why detach a perfectly good doctor, when they have a whole list of Secret Service men?"

Trent only smiled. The younger man waved his hand toward the paper.

"Surely this is n't all?"

"You know as much as I do. I leave in the morning for Benares. At the hotel I 'm to meet a fellow called Kerth—"

"Euan Kerth," Manlove interrupted, his eyes upon the document. "You 've heard of him, have n't you? He 's the best of his sort in India. He 's been in Tibet; was one of Younghusband's interpreters in nineteen-four. Speaks Hindustani, Burmese, mandarin Chinese, Tibetan, and God knows what else! You and he ought to hit it off fairly well together. But go on."

"I 'm to meet him at the hotel," Trent resumed. "Just what part he plays, I don't know yet. There I 'm also to find a message from this Swaying Cobra woman, and meet her at a place named in the message.

And—well, that 's all." He smiled. "Enlightening, is n't it?"

As he finished, Manlove strode to the door and tossed away his cigarette. There he paused, peering out.

"Where 's Ganeesh?" he asked, looking over his shoulder.

"I let him go for the evening. Why?"

"Just saw some one leave the compound; must have been he." Manlove returned to his chair. "Trent, I envy you—even if they are balmy at Delhi. This doctoring heathens is n't all it 's colored up to be. It 's getting on my nerves. I even dream about fever and stinking *fakirs.*"

Trent consulted his wrist-watch. "I have to ride up to Colonel Urqhart's and make a report. Remember the chap at Meera, Chatterjee? Some *hakim* burned his child's stomach with an iron. Of course she died. I 'm going to make an example of him." He rose. "I have to wash up a bit. I suppose you 're going to the lawn party?"

"Think not," decided Manlove. "I 'll be here when you return."

"Care to ride up with me?"

"No. I 'm rather tired."

Trent went to his bedroom and Manlove lighted another cigarette. He 'd miss the old sphinx, he told himself. Good old Trent! Why had n't he married? Frequently he asked himself that question; never Trent. There must be a reason, he mused, flicking the ashes from his cigarette. Maybe there had been a

woman—a typhoon. The typhoon sort could raise the deuce with a chap like Trent. Perhaps. . . . He stifled a yawn. Damn India; damn its climate. He had n't taken his leave this season; it was about due now. A jolly trip home; see the Old Fellow; see "Gray Towers."

He heard Trent moving about in the rear. He could n't picture him sleuthing it. Queer world anyhow. And Benares. What was afoot?

Another yawn. He flung his half-smoked cigarette through the doorway, and it fell upon the veranda in a mild shower of sparks, and lay there, its red tip glowing like a malevolent little eye.

3

It was after nine o'clock when Trent rode out of Sahib's Gaya and around the shoulder of a hill toward his bungalow. A golden moon floated in nebulous haze —an electric disc that transfused its heat into the night. The earth steamed and sweltered, and the perfumes of tropical blossoms stole out of the jungle and exhaled a heavy languor.

Trent, pipe clamped between his teeth, sweat running into his eyes from his helmet-band, jogged along, thinking leisurely (as men do in warmer climates) of the woman of the cobra-bracelet, and thinking more of the bracelet than the woman. It was one of his peculiarities to collect rare ornaments; among his curios he had a bangle of a Nepalese princess, a Burmese bell from a pagoda in the Pyinmana district, and a silver-

chased, turquoise-inset teapot from Tibet. The bracelet the woman wore was finely wrought, and its design not of the ordinary; this he recognized, even though he had but a glimpse of it. A king-cobra with a lifted hood. And the wearer. . . . Why had she lowered her veil—why had she denied that she came from his compound? Mystery. . . . But, he reflected, mysteries were not rare; mysteries, to such as he, in the jungle; in the ruins and tumbled grandeur of ancient temples; in the dim, dark bazaars, spice-reeking, where filth mocks British law, and Love and Death are one. . . . .

A white figure, ahead in the scented gloom, broke into his thoughts, a figure that at first was distinguishable only as a stain of pallor on the roadway. Trent experienced a quickening of interest. She of the cobra-bracelet? No. He could see now. Not a woman; a native. The man was moving at a swift gait, almost running; but as he drew nearer, he halted, looking about irresolutely, nervously. And at that moment (he was not more than ten yards away) Trent recognized him and reined in his mare.

"Chatterjee!" he called. "D 'ye want to see me?"

The native did not answer, only fixed upon him a mute, terrified stare, and crashed through the high, dense undergrowth at the side of the road. The sounds of his flight grew fainter as he plunged deeper into the jungle.

Trent stared at the spot where he disappeared. His first impulse was to follow—an impulse that he cast aside. Now that was odd, he thought. What in flam-

ing hades was the matter with him? For a moment he sat in mystified silence, then he kicked his mount lightly in the flanks.

A day of incidents. First, the despatch from Delhi, then the veiled woman, now this encounter. From where had the native come? The bungalow? Perhaps he was merely on his way from Meera, for the road passed his quarters. But he knew natives never walked when it was possible to ride. Anyhow, that did n't explain his actions. Confound it, he 'd have trouble with that fellow yet! This as he branched off from the main highway and clattered along the driveway to his compound.

Not until he reached the gate did he observe that the house was dark, squatting in gloomy secrecy among the surrounding trees. At first it puzzled him; then he decided that Manlove had probably gone to bed.

When his mare was stabled, he made his way into the living-room. In the dark he struck his knee on a sharp projection and swore. He fumbled for the light-switch; blinked in the sudden glare. A yawn and an indolent stretch. He 'd get a good sleep and—

"Hello!" he exclaimed, as his eyes trailed across the room to an over-turned chair. "What the devil!"

A piece of bronze, some Hindu god, lay on the floor, gleaming sinisterly, and a picture—its regular place was on the desk—had fallen to the floor. An insidious thought took root in his brain. With quick strides he reached Manlove's room. It was empty, the bed unused. Its desertion hurt him—a queer sensation,

that. He whirled about, returned to the living-room and halted, irresolute.

"Manlove!"

Silly to call, he thought. Perhaps Manlove had gone to the lawn party. But the overturned chair and the idol did not look well. Thieves? Or. . . . Suddenly the meeting with Chatterjee shaped into significance. He knew the workings of the native brain, and a frightful possibility suggested itself.

An electric torch lay on the table. He reached for it; stood with his hands poised in the air, thought temporarily suspended from action. For his eyes, lowered involuntarily, fastened upon a small, dark spot on the matting.

Regaining the power to move, he stooped. A sudden sickness seized him. Unmistakable. But why did blood affect him? Blood. The discovery added a spark to his suspicions. His imagination painted a swift, vivid picture. The look of terror on Chatterjee's face. . . . Manlove, the innocent. . . . But no! It could n't be!

In possession of the torchlight, he strode out upon the veranda. There he discovered a trail of spots identical with that on the matting, a trail that led down the steps. He made a quick search of the compound. A sense of helplessness smote him. Manlove, perhaps somewhere within calling distance, yet unable to summon him. . . .

He halted at the gate. On the left was jungle, dark and hushed; on the right, a few lights in the nearest

bungalow. Across the road was the mouth of a narrow path which he knew led to the ruins of an old temple hidden behind the rank foliage. At thought of the ruins an impulse made him forsake the compound and follow the path.

Less than two hundred yards from the road the growths thinned. Looming before him, spectral in the yellow mystery of the moonlight, was the temple. The outer court was throttled with weeds. Luxurious vines trailed from ruined pillar to ruined wall and wove a sanctuary for vipers. At the end of an avenue of crumbled columns gaped the black entrance of the inner court. An impalpable vapor steamed up from the moist plants and bathed the ruins in a dream-like haze, as the blurred waters of the ocean engulf and make fantastic the myriad rock-palaces of the sea-bottoms.

The dark inner court challenged Trent, and he snapped off the light and moved between the stone sentinels. A power, terrifying in its vagueness, pressed upon him, locking his muscles in a tension. A bat, startled out of hiding by the ring of his footsteps, flapped up from the parapet and wheeled across the moon's face. But for that, and an occasional rasp of an insect, the temple was swathed in a hush.

In the doorway of the inner court he paused. He groped for the shattered frame; clutched something tangible; fought against a terrible paralysis.

Yellow moonshine poured through a rent in the ceiling, drenched the walls and formed a honey-hued pool on the flagging.

In the wan light lay a human form.

A deadly inertia coiled about Trent's brain and body. For a moment he was unable to think, to do other than struggle against the constricting coils of horror. But at length he broke the rigor. A few steps brought him to the pool of moonlight. He knelt; switched on the torch; saw the face. Dull agony spread from his throat to his limbs. In that instant he seemed to slip back through a millenium and endure the concentrated pains of a hundred bodies—a flame of cosmic anguish burning down through the dim jungles of time.

Automatically his hand went to the heart, but before his trained fingers touched the breast he knew that to feel was useless. Dark moisture stained the tunic-front. He unbuttoned the garments. Knife wound! Manlove had been dead at least a half hour.

The infinitesimal fraction of a minute that he knelt there might have been an hour for the multitude of irrelevances that sped through his brain. Orders. Benares. . . . And he had cursed when he struck his knee! Had Manlove ridden with him to Colonel Urqhart's this would not have happened. Urqhart; what an absurd name. . . . . Murder. In a vague manner he wondered who had done it; in a vague manner he felt angry. Dead. Impossible. This must be a dream, a horrid nightmare. Damn these nightmares! It was the heat . . . . heat. . . . His comrade. . . . Kasvin. . . . Kut-el-Amara. And this was the end! The futility of things swept him, a chill and shudder-

some tide that served to wash some of the tangles from his thoughts.

He rose. He felt giddy, and the inner court, with its shadows, its pool of moonshine, swam in a throat-gripping vertigo. But it passed swiftly. Out of the mental chaos emerged a coherency: perhaps the one who had done this was still in or about the temple. The remembrance of Chatterjee immediately appeared to deny it. A solution of the affair unreeled quickly. Chatterjee, the avenger . . . . a fatal mistake. That explained the native's look of terror when he met Trent on the road, explained his flight.

Nevertheless, Trent made a search of the ruins and returned to the body. The face, outlined boyishly in the pallid moonlight, commanded his gaze with hypnotic insistence. Now that the first acute horror had dwindled, he was conscious of an abysmal loneliness, an ache that habited every nerve and fiber of his being.

He must notify Colonel Urqhart. But the body, what of that? He could n't leave it lying in this den of vipers. The very suggestion horrified him, although he knew the body was but a husk of flesh. He had some authority; he 'd act on his own responsibility.

An involuntary dread ran through him as he slipped his hands under the inert form and lifted it. His sight blurred, but he moved with a steady stride across the courtyard and through the gate. Upon reaching the bungalow, he laid the body upon the bed in Manlove's room. When he switched on the light, the boyish fea-

tures again compelled his gaze. Manlove had told him of the dream of "Gray Towers," of the House of Lords; and the memory of it, returning through the stupefaction that still surrounded him, sent a poignant charge into his throat. To have his dream perish like this! Whatever a man's philosophy of immortality, death remains a shock.

He was about to leave the room when his attention was arrested by the gleam of a bright object in the lifeless hand. He was forced to pry open the fingers. The gleaming thing proved to be a piece of reddish stone. Coral. It was oval-shaped and some six inches in circumference. An intricate design was overlaid in silver upon the smooth salmon-hued surface—a human figure. The oval was edged with silver, and at the top was a tiny clasp. The clasp was broken. He studied the silver design. It was evidently some sort of deity, but different from any he had ever seen—an ugly little god with three eyes.

What was it? he wondered—part of a necklace, an ornament? The broken clasp testified that it had been wrenched from its fastening. Perhaps in a struggle—*the* struggle. . . .

Temporarily dismissing it from his thoughts, he left it lying upon the table and went to the telephone.

4

Meanwhile, at the ḍâk bungalow, which looks out upon the main street of Sahib's Gaya, the *khansammah,*

a ghostly figure in his white garments, sat on the covered portico and watched a gharry approach in a whirl of dust.

The carriage was jerked to a halt at the compound, and from its dim interior appeared a form.

It was the strange Memsahib, the *khansammah* observed to himself.

Strange, indeed, he reflected; Memsahibs rarely wore veils, and those they affected were gossamer, cobweb-like affairs that hid not a feature. But this Memsahib wore an almost opaque veil, a veil which she lifted only to eat and when in her room. She had a beautiful face, and well that she covered it from befouling eyes. For the *khansammah* was a Mohammedan.

She was very generous, this Memsahib, oh, very generous, indeed! True, she asked many questions—about Major Trent Sahib and his friend, the other Dakktar Sahib—but she paid for the information. She had been at the dâk bungalow only since morning, and he hoped she would remain longer. Business was none too good.

Thus ran his thoughts as the woman alighted from the gharry and crossed the compound.

When she reached the steps he rose and rendered a salaam. As usual, her veil was lowered. He sensed a repressed excitement in the manner that her white hand closed upon the post of the veranda; a bracelet shone softly on her arm.

"*Khansammah,*" she began, in a low, vibrant voice that made him think of the golden tongue of a certain

singing-nautch he had once heard, "When does the next train leave for Mughal Sarai? Do you know?"

"Hah, Memsahib!"—with regret. "Must you leave? "Has not my hospitalit*ee* been all the Memsahib could —"

"Of course," she broke in, impatiently. "But the train?"

"At midnight, Memsahib. But it is unlik*elee* the Memsahib can get accommodations, for there is ver*ee* much travel at this time of the year—oh, ver*ee* much!"

"At midnight," she repeated, as though she had heard only that.

Then she entered—and the *khansammah* thought he saw her pause, falter, as with a sudden stroke of weakness.

5

And again meanwhile—

The moon paled, sank. Its senescent glamour lingered upon the towering plinth and fluted pillars of the temple of the Sacred Bo-tree, seven miles south of Gaya-town. A warm wind fretted the tapering leaves of the holy tree; the sunken courtyard was a cistern of gloom where tiny yellow lights swam like foam-flecks on a dark sea. These flecks of light, forming a semicircle about the Sacred Bo-tree, were many little butter-lamps. Their glow revealed a man seated on the Diamond Throne (just as Gaudama sat on the same spot in a buried century and contemplated his Dewa Laka); revealed his yellow features, his tonsured skull and

magenta robes; revealed the stone image of Buddha that looked down from the shrine with an expression of serene omniscience; revealed the row of crimson-togaed monks that knelt within the semi-circle of butter-lamps and murmured prayers.

The man on the Diamond Throne sat motionless. Only his lips moved, and his eyes. A hint of guile showed in his face. He repeated a *mantra* automatically, for his thoughts were elsewhere.

This was no other than his Holiness the Grand Lama of Tsagan-dhuka, who had pilgrimaged from his Tibetan abby to the Sacred Bo-tree—the first journey of the sort to be made by a lama of high rank since the visit of that venerable pontiff, the Tashi Lama. . . . Behold him, then, in the magenta robes of his office, squatting upon the Diamond Throne, reciting a Buddhist prayer.

The patter of bare feet on stone caused him to shift his gaze to the gloom beyond the courtyard. His black eyes squinted, and he traced the outline of a palanquin. The primitive conveyance came to a halt. A figure in loose robes took shape between the parted curtains; the light of the butter-lamps fell upon a man in scarlet, a man who descended into the sunken courtyard and approached the Diamond Throne. No mere priest, this newcomer, for he wore a mitre-shaped hat; a very obese, very pompous personage as he waddled up to his Holiness of Tsagan-dhuka.

The crimson cardinal spoke; and had anyone who understood Tibetan been standing close by, he would have heard:

"His Excellency the Governor of Shingtse-lunpo has arrived."

The Grand Lama ceased his *mantra.*

"Tell him I shall be with him when I have finished my reflections."

The cardinal bowed and took his leave. The curtains of the palanquin blotted out his corpulent person. Again the patter of naked feet sounded above the surreptitious whispering of the Bo-tree.

A cryptic smile slid across the Grand Lama's eyes; the lids dropped to hide it. He resumed the prayer.

"*Om mani Padme hum. . . .*"

Thus he sat—just as Gaudama sat on the same spot in a buried century. However, the Abbot of Tsagandhuka was not contemplating his Dewa Laka.

Above him the plinth of the temple strove skyward, secure in the knowledge of the riddle of Life and Death.

6

A half hour after Trent took the receiver from the telephone, Colonel Urqhart and Merriton, Head of the Police, rattled into his compound in a dog-cart. Accompanying them were several officers to whom Trent spoke by name.

". . . . And you found him in the ruined temple!" exclaimed the colonel, in the living-room, when the customary formalities had been observed. "Good God, major, what a pity! The poor, poor boy! His father and I were friends, y'know."

"I 'm positive Chatterjee did it," declared Trent.

"You see. . . ." And he told of the encounter on the road and the subsequent events.

"What were you saying, major?" asked the Head of the Police, coming out of the bedroom just as he finished. "But first—what 's this?"

He held out the oval of silver-overlaid coral, and Trent explained how he had found it.

"Some sort of native charm, I dare say," observed Merriton. "Tell me about this Chatterjee."

When Trent had retold his story, the Head of the Police enquired:

"Where 's the telephone? Ah! I see it!"

It was nearly midnight when Colonel Urqhart and Merriton prepared to leave.

"Major," said Trent's commanding officer, "you 'd better get some sleep. Eckard and Gerrish will remain to—"

"Sleep?" echoed Trent.

"You 'll need it if you 're going in the morning—and you *are* going? Orders, y' know. There 's nothing you can do here. I 'll personally attend to everything."

"Of course I 'll go." This from Trent as he passed his hand wearily over his forehead. "However, I shall sit up to-night. Eckard and Gerrish can remain—but I 'd rather be alone."

The colonel cast a glance toward Manlove's room.

"Poor chap!" he sighed. He extended his hand. "Well, good luck, major. I probably won't see you again before you leave."

They shook hands, and the colonel and Merriton departed. Not until the sounds of the dog-cart had dwindled did Trent discover that the Head of Police had left the piece of coral on the table. His first impulse was to call after him, but he decided to give it to him later, and dropped it into his pocket.

Through the seemingly endless night Trent kept vigil beside the curtained bed where Manlove lay. He sat huddled in a chair, his face expressionless; frequently he rose to pace the floor; on several occasions one of the men in the next room heard him murmuring to himself. Shortly after midnight (about the time the veiled Memsahib 's train roared out of Gaya toward Mughal Sarai) it began to rain. That was the prelude to a storm that crashed and tore in a fury about the bungalow. In the dead silence following, when the damp heat shut in and stars sparkled in the rain-swept sky, jackals chattered mournfully in the jungle.

The last stars passed and the earth awoke in a bath of gold. Ganeesh, with a frightened, awed expression, crept in hesitatingly with tea, and behind him came one of the officers.

"I 'll have to get ready to leave now, Eckard," Trent said laconically to the officer, when he had gulped down the hot liquid.

Twenty minutes later, washed and shaved, he came out of his bedroom and found Colonel Urqhart waiting for him.

"Just came by to tell you Merriton has n't found

Chatterjee yet," announced the colonel. "Cleared out, it seems. But they 'll get him."

"Uncommonly nice of you, Colonel," returned Trent. His face was drawn, his eyes veined with red, and a pallor underlay his tanned skin.

The colonel waved his hand toward the door. "My cart 's outside. I 'll drive you to the station. 'Bout time, is n't it?"

Trent nodded. He strode to the door of Manlove 's room and halted on the threshold, looking with dry eyes into the hushed apartment. A diamond-winged dragon-fly lay dreaming on the window-sill . . . . the white face shone through the mosquito-curtain. . . . . Thus Trent stood for a moment, then he turned and joined the colonel.

He talked very little during the ride to the station, and Colonel Urqhart did not press conversation. In the midst of chattering native passengers and a few whites, with an engine puffing heat into the already suffocating air, he parted with the colonel,—a hand-shake and a few perfunctory words—and settled down in his carriage.

Not until the train jerked out of the station did the strain snap. He relaxed wearily upon the leather-lined seat, a steady hammer of pain at the back of his neck. He felt suddenly alone, intensely alone—a sensation that carried him back to his boyhood, to a night when he awoke in a strange, black-dark room. He shuddered involuntarily. His eyelids burned. Sleep—sleep. The engine seemed to purr that one word, and the swaying

and rocking of the carriage lulled him into drowsiness.

He fell asleep, suddenly, with a picture of the hushed room—the diamond-winged dragonfly—painted upon his vision.

7

Trent was brought out of slumber by the sound of his name. He opened his eyes and perceived that the train was at a standstill. Heat pressed close about him, stifling him. Thrusting his head out of the window, he read the name of the station. He was but a short distance from Gaya. A telegraph messenger was walking along the platform shrilling:

"Major-rr Tr-rent Sahib!"

Trent called him, and as the train pulled out he tore open the envelope.

"Chatterjee found in river this morning," the message ran. "Stabbed. Let you hear particulars at Benares. Urqhart."

For some time after Trent read it he stared out of the carriage-window. Chatterjee—stabbed. He let the words filter and re-filter through his brain, let them settle and sink in. They gave a new significance to the encounter with the native on the previous night. Chatterjee—stabbed. Murdered? Or had he taken his own life—in remorse? But the river. . . . No. Murdered. That word stood out like wet type. Chatterjee— stabbed. Why? Obvious enough. The native's look of fright explained that. Perhaps he knew who slew Manlove. Chatterjee, whose lips were sealed. Blind

alley. He faced a wall behind which was hidden the identity of Manlove's slayer. Manlove, who, to his knowledge, had n't an enemy—

He stiffened at a sudden recollection; brought his fist down upon his thigh. Idiot! Colossal idiot! Why had not this occurred to him before? It was fantastic, yet. . . .

He procured from his pocket a pencil and an envelope, and scribbled on the back of the latter—scribbled a description of the woman he had met on the Meera road; of the cobra-bracelet, of the encounter and his suspicions. This he would send to Colonel Urqhart at the next station.

When he had finished, he read it, struck out a few words; folded the envelope; returned it to his pocket, and settled back in the seat to reflect upon the tragic immutability of circumstance.

CHAPTER IV

HOUSE OF THE SWAYING COBRA

TRENT, rested only by short naps on the way, stepped from the railway carriage in the Cantonment Station, in Benares, and, after a ride past dusty red brick barracks, reached the hotel—a series of small houses, with one main building. To his disappointment he found no message from Colonel Urqhart. Nor was Euan Kerth there. Mr. Kerth had arrived, he was told, but was not in at present. Trent left word to be notified directly Kerth returned, and went to his room, in one of the out-buildings.

Several hours later, refreshed by a sleep, washed and shaved, he seated himself on the portico to wait for Euan Kerth. On one end, peddlers were besieging a group of tourists; on the other, a girl with bronze-colored hair sat reading, a native in a flowered chintz coat drowsing at her feet. There was something slumberous and torpid in the scene. India, like the world, relapsed into a lethargy after the tumult of war.

When he slipped his hand into his tunic pocket for his cheroots, he found, instead of smokes, a hard, cold object. Withdrawing it, he recognized, not without some surprise, the oval of coral he had found in Manlove's hand. He remembered that Merriton had left it on the table in his bungalow, and he had put it in his

pocket with the intention of returning it to the Head of Police before leaving Gaya. He would have to send it back, now that a new complication had arisen—namely, the death of Chatterjee; it might prove a valuable clue.

He studied it. Time had mellowed the design and smoothed the once-sharp edges of the silver that rimmed the oval. Coral, he knew, was rarely used for purposes of ornamentation in India. Too, the three-eyed deity, a hideous figure, puzzled him, though he was by no means unversed in the symbolism of the many religions of the land. Coral and silver. The combination haunted him, was linked with an illusive fragment in his memory. It came to him suddenly. Tibet. Coral and silver from Tibet. While he was stationed at Darjeeling he frequently saw men from Phari and Gyangste with coral and silver ornaments.

He continued to stare at the oval. The ugly face of the three-eyed little god seemed to mock him; challenged him to fathom the power that impelled these waves of mystery that lapped up and touched him, and receded with their secrets. It brought a vision, too, of the hushed room at Gaya.

That was a hurt which only the ointment of time could heal. The tissues of human relationship mend slowly. His friendship for Manlove had taken seed deeply, in a measure unconsciously, nurtured by months of intimate companionship; and now his sensitive nature tingled and throbbed at the violence with which it had been wrenched from its roots.

With the murder looming in his thoughts, his mission

shrank. Adventure! Fabulous isles! . . . . Queer how last night's stars lose their fever and passion when they become a memory. But perhaps the work would distract him. At least it was different, and in his present mental condition the very thought of medicines and human ills was intolerable.

Shadows lengthened between the buildings; the peddlers and tourists disappeared; the bronze-haired girl had closed her book and lay back in the chair, staring into space. Upon her he unconsciously focussed his attention, and as he contemplated her, impersonally and as he would an inanimate object, she shifted her eyes to him, stared coolly, turned away, rose and entered her room.

And Trent forgot her.

A few minutes later, as he was at the point of making another inquiry about Euan Kerth, he saw a man leave the central building and move toward the portico where he sat—a man who approached and spoke his name.

"Major Trent?"

They shook hands. Kerth was an immaculately dressed fellow, with smooth, olive-tinted features. A rather Mephistophelian face. A small black mustache, carefully waxed, helped the suggestion. His hair was shiny-black, as were his eyes, and his dark complexion was only emphasized by white twills and a white felt hat. His fingers were long and slim, almost too well-shaped to be masculine. Something very fine and sleek, Gallic rather than Anglo-Saxon—that was Euan Kerth.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," he apologized in a

too-long-in-the-tropics drawl. "I've been with the Commissioner. You arrived this afternoon?"

Trent nodded. He saw behind the assumed languorous air a keen, searching glance; Kerth was measuring him as he was measuring Kerth. He came to the tentative decision that he was n't quite sure he liked him.

"Sit down, won't you?"—perfunctorily.

Kerth dropped with lazy grace into a chair and sat with his legs sprawled wide apart. He proffered some of the blackest cheroots Trent had ever seen.

"My Tamils," he explained, with an indolent smile. When the smokes were lighted, he asked: "Just how much do you know of this little party we 're about to start, major?"

"As little as possible, I think."

Kerth puffed on his cheroot. "Ever heard of this woman who styles herself the Swaying Cobra?"

"Never."

"Neither have I." A pause. "Of course you 've heard of Chavigny?"

Trent's answer was a smile.

"We almost got him the other day, in Delhi. We traced him to a native serai—Queen's Serai; but he eluded us. Left only a few blood-stains on the floor of his room. Blood-stains sometimes tell a lot, but they did n't in this instance. But Chavigny's bottled up in Delhi. Yet"—Kerth smiled—"yet I would n't be at all surprised if he pulled the wool over the Department's eyes. Of course you think he's involved in this affair?"

Trent's eyes followed the spiral of smoke from his cheroot.

"He might be," was the slow reply, "and, again, he might not. What does Sir Francis think?"

A wry smile. "He rarely confides in the Department. At any rate, I don't fancy we 'll encounter this Chavigny. You know he 's been running at large under the name of Leroux—Gilbert Leroux. Remember that; might be useful some time. If you want my opinion—But I 'm sure you don't. Now, as for this Swaying Cobra—"

But he was interrupted as a porter appeared and salaamed.

"Major Trent Sahib?" he enquired.

Trent nodded and received an envelope with his name written upon it.

"Pardon me"—this to Kerth as he tore off the end.

The missive was written in English, in feminine handwriting, and carried a faint, illusive odor—that of sandalwood.

GREETINGS!

I, the Swaying Cobra, welcome you to the Sacred City and beg the honor of a visit from you to-night. If you will be at the shop of Abdul Kerim, in the Sadar Bazaar, at eight-thirty o'clock, my trusted servant, Chandra Lal, will meet you and conduct you to my humble dwelling.

Your faithful servant,

THE SWAYING COBRA

When he had read it, he handed it to Kerth, who let his eyes run down the page and smiled.

"Suppose we move to the dining-hall?" the latter suggested. "I 'll finish what I have to say there."

Trent assented, and they rose and left the veranda.

As the purple-tongued shadows lapped them up, the last of the row of doors opened, and the girl with the bronze hair came out and moved after them toward the dining-hall.

2

"In other words," said Kerth, as a soft-shod "boy" arrayed the meal before them, "you are to deliver yourself blindfolded into the hands of this Swaying Cobra, and if she says go to the moon, then, according to the Old Man, you 're to go there, without questioning."

Trent listened, apparently abstractedly, for he was studying the amazingly clear profile of the girl at the next table. Punkahs, worked by electricity, disturbed straying tendrils of reddish-gold hair.

"The woman mystifies me as much as the affair itself," Kerth went on. "Who is she? It 's evident the Old Man trusts her—to a degree. From her name, 'Swaying Cobra,' I'd judge she's a nautch, yet, on the other hand, I 'm inclined to think she 's above that. Fact is, the Old Man was too infernally secretive about her; seemed afraid he 'd tell me something. However, he is n't absolutely sure of her. If he was, I would n't be here."

A tourist, was Trent's conclusion. (For he was still studying the girl.) She choked over the greasy, pep-

pery curry concoction. A moment later her soft voice floated to him as she spoke to her "boy."

"Confound him! Is he listening to me?" Kerth wondered. Then aloud, "My part is this: I'm to rig myself up as a native—a Rajput—and accompany you as your servant. My name will be Rawul Din."

Trent's eyes turned sharply from the girl to Kerth. He noticed, incidentally, that the latter's hair would need no lamp-black to make it like a native's.

"Suppose she objects?"

Kerth smiled—an expression that was almost sinister because of his dark, satanic features.

"That 's the point: she *must not* object!" After a pause he resumed: "The Old Man wanted that firmly impressed. In some way or other she must be forced to agree to that condition. You 're the diplomat of this expedition; that means it 's up to you. So said the Old Man. I 'm to be the connecting link between you and the Department."

"Is that keeping faith with her?"

"According to the letter of the contract, yes; morally, no. As I understand it, she demanded your word of honor you would n't 'communicate' any information. Therefore, you must not; what I don't hear and learn for myself is the Department's loss. Neat way of beating the devil around the bush, is n't it?"

It was not visible upon Trent's face whether or not he agreed with Kerth. However, his next question hinted negatively.

"If she discovers you 're not Rawul Din, the Rajput, what then?"

Kerth shrugged. "*Adrushtam!*" he said, which means, "It is Fate!" Then he lighted a cheroot and leaned upon his elbows, a queer smile lurking in the corners of his mouth. "It means this, major," he continued. "If she 's loyal, as the Old Man believes, she will either be very angry and throw over the whole business, or overlook it and simply demand that espionage be discontinued. But"—his face, veiled by smoke, looked more satanic than ever— "if she isn't loyal, then—well, we 'll both probably. . . ." He finished with a lift of his eyebrows.

Trent watched the bronze-haired girl as she left the dining-hall—as did others, for she was a type to draw eyes.

"To-night's the test," Kerth observed aloud. "If you succeed in forcing your point, good. Otherwise, I return to Delhi." He looked at his watch. "It 's close to seven now, and my metamorphosis will require some time. Shall we adjourn?"

They did.

3

Before Trent left his room he placed the oval of coral in his handbag; then he went out on the portico to smoke and watch the stars gather about the cleaving silhouette of a church steeple across from the hotel grounds.

At one end of the veranda two shadowy forms were

conversing; a woman's voice drifted to him, a soft voice that slurred and caressed the words it spoke. It was vaguely familiar, and in a detached manner he identified it with the girl of the dining-hall.

The phosphorescent hands of his wrist-watch crept to five minutes to eight before Euan Kerth put in his appearance. A heavy footstep announced a turbaned man. He halted in the light cast from a window; executed a salaam. He wore white breeches, an alpaca coat and a white shawl. A huge turban shadowed a brown face and a carefully waxed mustache. Had it not been for that and the slim hands, Trent would not have recognized him.

"*Salaam, Huzoor!*" was his greeting. "Is the *Huzoor* ready?"—this in the manner of a native trying to affect an Oxford accent.

Trent nodded and rose, and Kerth fell in behind.

"There 's no need to take a gharry," said Kerth. "The Sadar Bazaar is n't far."

Their walk led them past the dusty red brick barracks that Trent had seen that afternoon, and within a short while they reached the Sadar Bazaar, where, after many inquiries, they were directed to the shop of Abdul Kerim—a dingy little hole in a narrow lane. A native was lounging in the doorway, but at their approach he straightened up and salaamed.

"Major Trent Sahib?" he queried respectfully, with a grin that displayed betel-stained teeth. "I am Chandra Lal." Then he looked inquisitively at Kerth. "Who is this, Sahib?"

"My servant."

Chandra Lal shook his head. "I was instructed to bring only Major Trent Sahib."

"But it is my wish that my bearer accompany me."

The native shifted uncomfortably. "The sahib's wish is law; yet if I do other than I have been bidden I will be a disobedient servant." Another glimpse of scarlet teeth; a rather nervous smile. "So what shall I do, Sahib?"

"My man shall go—*maloom hai!*"—sternly. "I will be responsible to your mistress."

Chandra Lal saluted. "*Achcha,* Sahib! I have a carriage in the street!"

At the mouth of the lane a landau was waiting, and when Trent and Kerth were seated on cushioned springs, Chandra Lal flicked his whip.

Out of the Cantonment they were whirled, and eastward into the old city, where constricted streets refused passage to any vehicle. They drew up by an oval-shaped, tree-grown expanse, and the landau was left in charge of a man who was waiting for that particular purpose. Then began a journey on foot that was memorable to the two Englishmen because of the muddle of dim, narrow highways into which it took them. Chandra Lal leading, they percolated through streets and passages that stank of every unpleasantness known to Indian cities; mere clefts where the stars swam at distances immeasurable; stairs, tunneled lanes and alleys, and amidst ramshackle, tumbled buildings and temples and shrines.

Trent's sense of direction was completely baffled when they came at length to a quarter where the houses were more pretentious—a long street of several-storied dwellings, of projecting eaves, of white walls and of latticed windows that hinted at the lurking mystery of zenana and harem.

Into one of these houses the native guided them, up a short flight of stairs and into a dark room. The air was fresh and cool, fanned by invisible punkahs. A snap brought on electric lights, and Trent blinked about him; blinked and suppressed a smile, for he realized the entrance into the room while it was yet unlighted was done for purely dramatic effect.

His eyes, roving around the chamber, missed not a detail; a chamber wholly amazing and incredible to the Westerner, who rarely, if ever, sees into the houses of the wealthy, high caste Hindus. Trent, however, (to whom India was an open book, as much as it ever will be to any white man) was only mildly surprised. The chandeliers were crystal, tinted amber by the yellow lights. Brassware and gold brocade (the latter hung to hide all doors except the one by which they had entered) introduced an effect of rich browns and richer golds; and a spire of incense uncoiled from a brazen bowl to be dispelled by punkahs and leave the heavy fragrance of musk swimming in the air.

"My mistress will join you presently," announced Chandra Lal. "Be seated, Sahib, and you will be served with refreshments!"

Trent flung himself upon a divan pushed against the

wall; silken cushions yielded to his weight and clung to him caressingly. Kerth dropped cross-legged at his feet.

Before Chandra Lal made his exit he drew the gold-hued draperies opposite where Trent reclined, drew bamboo blinds and disclosed a white arch that framed a portion of a garden. Stone steps sank into a courtyard where rustling shrubs wove shadows about a fountain; falling water played flute-notes on a tiled basin; stars scraped a white wall.

"She 's no novice, this cobra," thought Trent. "Wonder if she 's anything like her lair?"

". . . . wine," thought Kerth. "And we must drink it . . . . unless—yes, guile for guile."

Suddenly, from behind gold curtains, came the faint whispering of music. Trent smothered an insurgent desire to laugh. Incongruity, the essence of India! The music was made by a gramophone! Presently he recognized the tune—Tschaikowsky's "Serenade Melancholique"!

He glanced furtively at Kerth. The latter's face was expressionless, his slim hands toying with the tassel of a cushion. Trent sensed in his attitude the same wild desire to laugh that possessed him.

"Steady!" he mentally encouraged himself, fixing his gaze upon a piece of brassware close by—a *lota* overlaid with copper and chased with mythological figures. "Hmm. . . . Half as old as India, I 'll wager," ran his musings. "Siva—who the deuce is the other chap?"

Gold brocades parted and a turbaned servant glided

out silently with a tray, which he placed on a pearl-inlaid table. Claret-hued wine glowed in twin beaten-brass goblets, rich as melted rubies. One he passed to Trent, the other to Kerth. Then he made a soundless departure.

Inwardly, Trent smiled. And drained his goblet. The gramophone ceased; only the music of the fountain stole to him, with a breath of fragrant shrubs that made the incense seem sensuous and heavy.

Again the brass *lota* claimed his gaze; held it until he heard a sigh from Kerth and looked down to see the latter's eyelids droop, to see his eyes close and his chin sink into his white shawl.

"Damn!" he swore, almost inaudibly, and his hand sprang to Kerth's shoulder and gripped it none too gently. "Rawul Din!"

As he pronounced the name, Kerth fell against the cushions of the divan, drugged in sleep. Some one laughed—a laugh that rippled low in the throat. Trent did not look toward the sound immediately, although that was his first impulse. He let his eyes turn naturally and rest, at first incredulously, upon the woman who had entered and who stood regarding him with a mocking smile. The blood flooded his temples; after a second it receded, leaving him cold, numb, with a tingling sense of unreality. He did not rise; merely stared; and presently forced a smile.

"Sarojini Nanjee," he said, trying to put down the emotions that declared insurrection against his will. And he repeated, "Sarojini Nanjee, the Swaying

Cobra?" He smiled. "I confess, I never once suspected."

Outlined against the gold draperies she stood, dressed as nautches dress, only with more richness and without the customary head-scarf. Her garments were full and as shimmery as cobwebs in the sun, and confined at the waist with a goldcloth girdle that matched the tint of her marvelously smooth skin. Her eyes burned under heavy lids, burned and mocked him; and by their feverish brightness he understood that this meeting wrought in her an excitement equal to his, although she was prepared for it.

"I did not intend that you should suspect," she told him as she moved to the divan where he reclined. "I knew you would not come if you did."

Not until then did he rise. He smiled, and the smile lingered as she bent over Kerth and drew back the lids from his eyes.

"Why did you disobey me by bringing this man?" she demanded, and, assured that Kerth was drugged, dropped gracefully upon the cushions.

"Why did you drug him?" he countered.

The blood still throbbed at his temples. The irony of it, that they should meet again! And on this mission! She was as beautiful as ever. But the lure of her eyes—eyes as purple as moist violets—of her smooth golden skin and lithe body, no longer affected him. All that was in the sepulcher of the past. A memory that was like the taste of stale wine upon the tongue.

"I put a sleeping powder in his wine because what I am going to say is for only *your* ears," she replied.

"And you 're called the Swaying Cobra," he mused, more to himself than to the woman, "or did another write that note?"

"I am the Swaying Cobra." A pause. She studied him from under half-lowered lids. "I dance for those I love. I have only venom for those I hate."

The Swaying Cobra! He almost laughed. That was a good symptom, that he could be amused. A pretty viper! Resolving to let her open the subject of his visit, he allowed his eyes to wander about the room.

"Here I cease trying to be an Englishwoman," she said, perceiving his inquisitive look. He did not fail to register the ring of bitterness beneath that assertion. "In Jehelumpore and in Delhi it is different, but here—here I am a Rajputni." Another pause. She laughed, and it was not without a sting. "I know what you are thinking: that you will refuse to work with me because—because of a foolish Anglo-Saxon sentimentalism!"

She waited for him to respond; he did not.

"But why not forget that we ever knew each other—and did we ever really know each other? Why not regard this as an impersonal affair? Individuals do not count where an empire is concerned."

Trent smiled discreetly and held his tongue.

"I bear you no rancor," she went on. "On the contrary, I recognize and respect the qualities that

prompted me to select you for this mission—imagination, wits, honor! Yes, for these things I chose you—forgetting that when we last saw each other it was not under the most pleasant circumstances. What is dead is dead.''

She fell silent, and he spoke for the first time.

''You 've anticipated,'' he said. ''I was sent here to work with you and I intend to. I 've already forgot that we ever met before to-night. What is dead is dead.''

The woman smiled—but had she known what was in his mind at that moment she might not have been so pleased. However, she did not. And she lay back among the brocaded cushions, quite at ease, her hands clasped behind her head, chin tilted, eyes looking upon him as a cat's eyes look upon the mouse it is about to play with.

All of which did not pass unobserved by Trent, who pictured, instead of a woman lying upon the gold silks with her head lifted, a lithe, beautiful cobra with its black hood raised above the cushions; pictured her thus, and returned her gaze with frankness and a smile that disarmed her.

She clapped her hands and a servant brought wine. ''Were you well informed as to the terms of the agreement?'' she questioned, handing him a cup of claret-hued liquor.

''I believe so.''

''That when you leave this house you are no longer Major Arnold Trent, but another—a well of secrets

from which no man can draw, and as mute as the Buddha at Sarnath?''

He demonstrated that he could do so by remaining silent. She resumed:

''And you will do as I direct?''

''To a reasonable extent,'' he modified.

''To a reasonable extent,'' she repeated, and nodded. ''And if you do not understand a thing, you will trust to my judgment that it is better you do not understand it.''

''Then I 'm to deliver myself blindfolded?'' he put in, remembering Kerth's words of the early evening and glancing involuntarily toward the drugged figure.

''You will be told all that it is consistent to tell.'' She took a sip of wine and surveyed him. ''What is your first question?''

He thrust back the query that came to his tongue and reverted to his conservative tactics. He sat as mute and expressionless as the Buddha at Sarnath. When a moment had passed, she announced:

''You would like to know how I know what I know about the jewels; is it not so?''

''I would like to know *what* you know first,'' he corrected.

She laughed—that laugh that rippled low in her throat.

''What I know is locked away safely until the time is ripe to bring it forth. Meanwhile, I will say this much: the jewels have not left India.''

''Then they *will?*''

He flashed out the question with the air of a fencer thrusting at a weak point in his opponent's guard. But foil met foil. She replied:

"Did I say so, O wise one? Again your thoughts are as clear as a crystal pool. You say to yourself, 'Such a hoard of jewels cannot be smuggled out of India; she is trying to confuse me.' But nay! The gods of India are many and I swear by all of them that every gem that was stolen, down to the last pearl, can be spirited out of India at any moment it is so desired—and under the very eyes, nay, the protection, of your Secret Service!"

If this statement surprised him, his face did not betray it; he disconcerted her by looking interestedly at the brass *lota.* His indifference drew fire.

"I said it could be done!" she declared. "Whether it will be is for you to learn. Oh, you do not deceive me! I know you are consumed with curiosity, under that shell of yours! Your Raj, well fed and growing fat with wisdom, thinks it has a clue. Chavigny! The Raj thinks Chavigny is involved!"

She leaned closer; peered intently into his eyes. The illusive fragrance of sandalwood from her hair was not calculated to make him feel any more at ease. But he did not stir nor wink an eyelid under the close scrutiny.

"Chavigny!" she mocked. "Chavigny, the famous thief! Chavigny, whom some silly Secret Service man tracked to Indore—and lost! Chavigny, driven into hiding in Delhi! Pah! Let the Raj search for Cha-

vigny, let it turn Delhi inside out—while we look on and laugh! You—you have imagination! I can guess what is in your mind, for I, too, have imagination! You have pictured a gigantic criminal organization—a gem syndicate, let us say—a flock of jewel vultures who have swooped down and plucked clean the bones of the empire! And perhaps you even think Chavigny the leader, yes?"

She smiled, quite pleased with herself. Then once more she leaned close to him.

"What would you think if I told you there *is* such a band—an order, we will call it—of jewel vultures who have flown away with riches worth a dozen rajah's ransoms? What would you think? Only"—she paused dramatically—"we will omit Chavigny, for if there be such an order he is not its head nor in it!"

He drew out his cheroots; passed them to her. She refused, and he lighted a cigarette and flicked the match through the archway. Then he suggested:

"Aren't all cards to go on the table?"

She smiled wisely. "No, I can play them more effectively one by one," was her retort.

His brain was working swiftly yet carefully. When he had selected his words he uttered them.

"Presuming there is such an order, as you call it, we'll go further and say that you, by some unguessable means, have become a member; and are working with them for the Raj."

She looked her approval. "Presumably"—with a nod. That word was a key to further knowledge.

"Then it would seem logical, if I 'm to work with you, for me to be initiated into the mysteries of this order—become a member, in other words."

"Go on," she encouraged.

"So the purpose of this visit, I take it, is for me to learn the 'Open Sesame' of the order."

And having said that much, he realized it was sufficient and relapsed into quiet to let her do the rest of the talking.

"You have already proved that I chose well," she announced. "But before I go on you must give me your word of honor that all I have said and will say, all that occurs until I release you from the promise, will never be repeated—by word or writing."

"I give it," he returned quietly.

She leaned over and deftly drew back the lids from Kerth's eyes; Trent caught a fleeting glimpse of the whites.

"To-morrow you leave Benares," she directed, again assured. "You will take a train in the morning for Bombay and go to an address which I shall give you; and do as I instruct." Her hand slipped under her waist and brought out a long blank envelope. "In this envelope are your instructions. I must have your promise not to read them until you are on the train to Bombay; then destroy them immediately."

He inclined his head and placed the envelope in his pocket.

"You said that when I leave this house I am no longer Major Trent," he reminded.

"You are Robert Tavernake, a jeweller, from London. All that is contained in the instructions."

"Including the name of the order?"—his curiosity escaping him.

For answer she clapped her hands and curtains parted to admit a servant with a black lacquer tray. From the tray she lifted a small box; opened it as the servant padded out.

"This is the symbol of the order"—removing a string of beads.

Had Trent felt any hesitancy about plunging into this blind mission it would have vanished at sight of the beads—reddish coral beads, with an oval-shaped pendant overlaid with the silver image of a three-eyed god! The only emotion he displayed was to moisten his lips; but it required all the force he could marshal to check the questions that flooded to his tongue, to mask his surprise and reach with a steady hand for the beads. Despite his control, it seemed for a momnt that he would betray his nervousness.

". . . . the Order of the Falcon," he heard her say. "See—" She inserted her fingernail under the silver band that finished the coral; the pendant opened, like a locket. The interior was silver and a name was engraved upon the back—"Robert Tavernake."

She snapped the oval shut and he took the beads; twisted them carelessly around his fingers, until the deep reddish coral seemed like huge drops of blood welling from his hand. As he caught the significance of the illusion, he looked up quickly and spoke.

"Am I to carry these?"

She nodded.

His thoughts swung back to the oval that lay in his handbag at the hotel.

"Is it customary to have the name engraved—like this?"—with a gesture.

After the words left his mouth he realized he had made an indiscreet move. She looked at him suspiciously, then answered:

"Customary, yes—among those who possess such beads."

He did not fail to grasp the insinuation that her speech bore. He glanced down at the beads in his hand, casually enough; toyed with them; slipped them into his pocket. His heart had not resumed its normal beat, but the tension had eased. He fastened his eyes upon the relaxed figure of Kerth and—

"It will be permissible, I presume," he began, as though the sight of the turbaned head suggested the question, "to take my bearer along?"

Did a smile flicker across her eyes, he wondered, or was it only his fancy? The answer came decisively.

"It is scarcely practicable."

"Why?"—a shade too artlessly.

"Servants have eyes to see and ears to hear."

Something in her tone caused him to wonder if she had penetrated under Kerth's masquerade. All the while he was subconsciously thinking of the mate to the oval in his pocket.

"What harm in taking him to Bombay?" he pursued, conscious that he was losing ground.

Again he could have taken oath that he saw the shadow of a smile in her eyes.

"To Bombay?" she repeated thoughtfully. "No"—slowly—"no, I see no objection. I concede that." But he did not like the manner in which she said it. "Conditionally, however," she added. "He must leave to-night. When he reaches Bombay let him reserve a room for you at the Taj Mahal—and wait."

Trent was discreet enough to accept her terms without question. His eyes returned to Kerth. He saw him stir slightly, heard a sigh leave his lips. The woman, too, saw and heard.

"He is awakening," she observed. "I shall summon Chandra Lal to guide you back to your hotel."

Again she clapped her hands; again the servant appeared. She spoke to him swiftly, not in English nor Hindustani, but in a tongue Trent did not understand, and the man vanished with a salaam.

Sarojini rose; Trent, too, got up.

"*Salaam, Burra Dakktar,*" she said, lapsing into Hindustani and bringing the visit to an end. "I, the Swaying Cobra—who dance for those I love, but have only venom for those I hate—bid thee farewell until the gods bring us together again. And may that be soon!"

She smiled and contemplated him, once more as a cat contemplating prey; smiled with eyes that spoke mockery as she suffered him to salute her fingers; and

the last picture he had of her was as she crossed the golden room and parted the golden curtains, vanishing like a cobra into its lair.

He turned then to Kerth and shook him. The latter was slow to awaken. Lids lifted to reveal rheumy eyes, but as he recognized Trent sleep was wiped away, like a cobweb. His gaze swept the room; he rose unsteadily.

"I am ready, Sahib!" announced Chandra Lal, appearing in the doorway.

Kerth opened his mouth, as if to speak; shut it; shot Trent a cryptic glance.

"Come." This from Trent, laconically.

Thus they left the house of the Swaying Cobra, left it with its vain, old-world atmosphere and its golden room; re-traversed the labyrinth of streets; got into the landau; whirled toward the Cantonment.

4

Not until they reached the hotel, until Chandra Lal flicked his whip and rolled away into the gloom, did either of the Englishmen speak.

"So you 've known her before!" observed Kerth as they approached Trent's room.

Trent said, without surprise: "You heard?"

"Everything. . . . I 'll drop over and find out about the Bombay trains; join you in a moment."

As Kerth moved toward the central building, Trent unlocked the door. After he switched on the light, his first act was to open his bag and insert his hand into the pocket where he had left the piece of coral. His

fingers trembled, for he felt that he was questioning for the identity of Manlove's slayer; trembled—and groped in an empty pocket.

For several seconds he stood motionless, trying to adjust himself to the situation. When he came into full sentience, he looked carefully through the bag. He even searched his pockets. But the oval was not to be found. . . Some one had entered his room; stolen it. The realization burned like acid into his brain. But if—

His mental inquest was cut short as a knock announced Kerth.

"Message for you," said the latter, extending a telegram.

Trent hastily tore it open; read:

"Party fitting description bought ticket for Mughal Sarai last night. *Khansammah* at dâk bungalow says she asked questions about you and Manlove. Following up clue. Nothing new. Urqhart."

A sense of disappointment smote him. First Chatterjee; then the oval; now this! A series of blind alleys.

He applied a match to the telegram and watched it burn.

"Train leaves in an hour and a half," Kerth volunteered, taking a seat and staring inquisitively at the ashes as they fluttered to the floor.

"How 'd you suspect the wine?" Trent enquired, unbuttoning his tunic.

"It 's my business to suspect. I emptied the cup under the divan and, afterwards, expected any minute

to see it seeping out. As it is, I 'm not sure she did n't smell a mouse. Gad! The way she pulled back my eyelids!''

Trent hung his tunic on a chair. ''Don't object if I get comfortable, do you?'' he asked. ''Rather done up; awake all last night, you know.''

Kerth waved his slim hand. ''Go ahead; I 'll have to pack up shortly.'' Then, as Trent undressed: ''This Sarojini, she's a shrewd one, major, and I don't envy you the task of matching blades with her. However, you gained a point on her to-night. I was rather surprised that she gave in so easily; not so sure, either, that there is n't a trick in it.'' He laughed easily. ''Oh, I 'll wager she has a bag of tricks! And do you think she was telling the truth when she said Chavigny has nothing to do with this Order of the Falcon?''

Trent, stripped but for one garment, propped himself against two pillows, pencil and pad in hand.

''I 'm sure I don't know,'' he returned, making a notation. ''Pardon me for taking a few notes; 'fraid I 'll forget 'em. No, don't go. . . . . About Chavigny: why should she say he is n't, if he is?''

''To confuse you.'' Kerth drew out a silver cigarette case. ''Have a smoke? And what d' you suppose she meant by saying the jewels could be spirited out of India under the protection of the S. S.?'' Kerth searched from pocket to pocket for a match. ''Have you a light, major?''

Trent's hand moved involuntarily to his side; then he motioned toward his tunic.

"In the pocket."

And he continued to write as Kerth reached into the pocket of his coat. He read the notes he had made:

Who the deuce would want the pendant? Answer: if a name is engraved inside, it would be very valuable to the owner. Yet the fact that the coral was found in M.'s hand doesn't prove conclusively that its owner is the murderer.

He looked up as Kerth extended a lighted match, took it and held it to his cheroot.

"Thanks"—briefly.

"Do you think," interrogated Kerth, "you could find her lair without a guide?"

Trent smiled. "Hardly."

"I 'd take oath that her man, Chandra Lal, led us along the same street twice! Oh, she 's a wily one! And the way she had us taken into the room while it was dark!"

He puffed on his cheroot and Trent continued to jot down notes.

"Furthermore," Kerth drawled, "why does n't she want you to read those instructions until to-morrow? Some catch in it."

Conversation languished, and presently Kerth drew out his watch and observed: "Nearly midnight. I 'll have to be moving on."

He rose and extended his hand.

"I 'll take a room at a native serai in Bombay—for atmosphere—and meet you at the station. Until then, good luck!"

In the doorway he paused. He looked particularly satanic at that moment, and again Trent was not quite sure that he liked him.

"Bombay, major!" were his parting words. And the door closed behind him.

Trent stared at the blank panels for a moment; then, while he ran his fingers through his hair, he glanced over his notes:

Something queer about this Chavigny. May not belong to Order, but he's not to be overlooked. Last alias was Gilbert Leroux, Kerth said. Kerth is a downy bird. Gilbert Leroux. Names mean nothing. Sarojini took particular pains to empress it upon me that Chavigny is *non compos mentis*. Therefore, he isn't. He's something. What? And—Sarojini is a connection of the Nawab of Jehelumpore—the jewels of the Nawab were among those stolen. Find out if she was in Jehelumpore at time of theft.

Then he tore off the slip of paper, crumpled it and held a corner to his cheroot. When the blaze lapped up to his fingers he let the paper fall to the floor, then swung his feet over the edge of the bed and reached for his tunic. From the inside pocket he removed the long envelope Sarojini Nanjee had given him. It was sealed and its white surface invited inspection. He made a movement to open it; hesitated. Why not? As Kerth suggested, there might be a trick—and he knew only too well that she was not above chicanery. But he did not open it; slipped it under his pillow.

A glance at his wrist-watch. He procured his revolver; snapped open the breech; inspected the car-

tridges; clicked it shut; placed it beneath the pillow with the envelope. Then he switched off the light and lay with his cheroot's end glowing in the darkness.

The discovery of the symbol of the Order revealed another side to the mystery surrounding Manlove's death, and during the ride back to the hotel he had constructed a new theory—a theory that he reviewed now. The analogy between the Swaying Cobra and the woman of the cobra-bracelet did not escape him. One suggested the other. Surely it was plausible to surmise that Sarojini was the veiled woman, although he was at a loss to find a convincing motive for her presence at Gaya. However, Colonel Urqhart's telegram stated that the woman had made inquiries about him—and what other woman was interested? Further proof was offered by the fact that the mysterious woman left Gaya on the night of the tragedy for Mughal Sarai, the junction for Benares. Finally, there was the coral pendant-stone. Sarojini had called it the "symbol" of the Order; therefore, only a member of that mysterious band was likely to possess it, and had not she admitted she was a member? And the pendant-stone was stolen —evidently for the reason that engraved inside was the name of its owner. Sarojini was in Benares; it was logical to assume, then, that some one in her employ had entered his room and removed the condemning evidence.

But, on the other hand, there were elements to upset this theory. Clues indicated that Manlove was stabbed at the bungalow and carried to the temple-ruins.

Could a woman do that? Under the stress of circumstances, yes. But why move the body—unless to hide it? Or had Manlove been mortally wounded at the house and gone of his own volition to the ruins before his death? Possible—but he could conjecture no cause for such action.

And there was Chatterjee. Since the receipt of the telegram telling of his death, Trent was of the opinion that the native knew something about the crime and for that reason was killed. Had Chatterjee gone to the bungalow that night, grief-crazed and believing Trent responsible for his child's death, to administer primitive justice? Had he witnessed the crime and fled? Of course, there was the possibility that Chatterjee's death might have been a coincidence—the termination of a quarrel between him and another native. Yet Trent was not inclined to lay great importance upon this, as he considered, meager explanation and his thoughts returned to the woman.

He could fix the guilt upon neither Sarojini Nanjee nor Chatterjee. Of the two, he least suspected the native. He knew the woman to be unscrupulous—whether to the point of murder he was uncertain. True, it may not have been deliberate murder. She might have gone to the bungalow for (again) a mysterious reason; might have been discovered by Manlove. . . . But the glove did not exactly fit. Nor had he any concrete reason to believe her the woman of the cobra-bracelet—or to believe the woman of the cobra-bracelet involved. That the latter had worn a heavy veil, sur-

rounded her, in his eyes, with an aura of mystery. This he realized, and gave her the benefit of the doubt.

Nevertheless, the coral pendant linked Sarojini with the crime; suggested that even though she did not actually commit the deed, she was undoubtedly implicated.

All of which did not clear the mystery; instead, bewildered him the more and kept suspicion, like the needle of a compass, wavering between Chatterjee, Sarojini Nanjee, the woman of the cobra-bracelet (if she were not Sarojini) and a person unknown.

His cheroot had burned low, and he got up and flung it away, and made sure the door was secure before he returned to the bed; then he relaxed and lay staring up into the darkness—darkness that was hotter because of the thick mosquito-curtain—until he fell asleep.

5

Trent returned to consciousness gradually, as a diver rising from the bottom of the sea. He was aware of another presence in the room before he was completely awake, and he strained at the threads of sleep that still entangled him.

The first proof of a presence in the hot, dark void that enclosed him was the sound of repressed breathing. He felt, now at the helm of his faculties, a movement under his pillow—realized it was a *hand,* a hand that withdrew stealthily, that belonged to a dark figure crouched outside the mosquito-curtain. A turban and

shoulders were silhouetted upon the gray rectangle of a window. He sensed eyes upon him, cat-like eyes that saw despite the darkness.

With a stealth that proved that the intruder was no novice, but of the school of thieves that graduate well-nigh perfect adepts in the art of silent movement, the silhouette receded from the bed. Trent realized that in all probability his revolver had been placed beyond reach; attack by surprise was impossible because of the mosquito-curtain. So he lay there, undecided, scarcely breathing; and, after a moment, he let his hand slide slowly, cautiously, toward his pillow.

The silhouette halted; was motionless.

Trent's hand touched the seam of the pillow and pressed underneath. It encountered steel.

The silhouetted turban was moving again—toward the door.

Trent gripped the revolver. He turned on his side noisily and sighed, as though in sleep. At the sounds, the dark figure stepped swiftly to one side of the window, thus vacating the gray rectangle.

Trent waited no longer. He raised the mosquito-curtain and jumped. And the thing he apprehended happened. His head and shoulders became enmeshed in the netting. Cursing his awkwardness, he rent the fabric with a downward sweep of his hand. As he leaped through the opening, he saw the door flung wide, saw the man plunge out.

He pressed the trigger—and it snapped harmlessly.

"Damn!" he spat out, knowing the weapon had been tampered with.

Again he pressed the trigger; again that absurd click.

Meanwhile the door slammed. The crash awakened him to the fact that the thief was escaping, and he dashed across the room and threw open the door. As he emerged, a figure disappeared behind the far corner.

He rushed in pursuit, his bare feet padding upon the stone flags. At the end of the portico he halted sharply, almost colliding with something in white—a something that appeared, as if by magic, from behind a suddenly opened door; that came to a standstill as abruptly as he, and gasped.

"Oh!"

Words died in Trent's throat. The girl, whom he recognized as she of the bronze hair, wore a long white garment, and her hair fell in heavy braids over her shoulders; her hands were at her throat.

For a moment they stood and stared, both speechless. Then:

"Oh!" she repeated, with a hysterical little laugh. "You frightened me! I woke up and—" She swallowed with difficulty. Her eyes dropped to her nightdress, she threw a significant look toward him and darted into her room.

Not until he heard the key turn in the lock did he remember the very substantial reason for his presence on the portico—and then that reason was nowhere in

sight, but was, he surmised, at a safe distance, laughing at the awkwardness of all sahibs in general and one sahib in particular.

His face burning, and not altogether from the heat, he returned to his room. The glowing hands of his wrist-watch pointed to nearly two o'clock.

When he switched on the light it shone on six cartridges lying upon the table—cartridges that deft fingers had removed from his revolver and left to mock him. It was no mystery how the thief had managed to get in, for he knew that entrance could be effected with the aid of a master key, but it did puzzle him that neither his money nor the contents of his bag were touched. He suspected, however, now that he had time to review the affair, that the intruder had not come bent on loot, but after one particular thing—and when he assured himself that that thing was safe under his pillow, he guessed that his awakening had prevented the man from making away with it.

As he held up the envelope, he was once more seized by an impulse to open it. But, as before, he placed the tempting object under the pillow. Then he returned the cartridges to the breech, and, after propping a chair against the door, turned off the light and stretched himself upon the bed.

Again a wave of mystery had lapped up and touched him, and receded without leaving a hint of the power that energized it. He could not suspect Sarojini Nanjee, for he saw no reason why she should have

the envelope stolen. Other hands were at work.

But thoughts and questions did not harry him long. He felt certain that he need not fear another intrusion that night, and when drowsiness returned he yielded to it.

6

The next morning at *burra hazri,* or "big breakfast," he found himself searching the dining-hall for the bronze-haired girl; but she was not there, nor did she appear during the meal.

When he returned to his room he discovered a letter under the door, and tore it open with quickened interest as he recognized the handwriting and inhaled the delicate fragrance of sandalwood.

GREETINGS!

You will no doubt be surprised when I inform you that instead of going to Bombay, you will go to Calcutta. The address of the place to which you are to report is set forth in the packet I gave you, and which you, being a man of honor, have not read ere you receive this. I told you Bombay last night because one can never be sure there are no ears listening, even in one's own house.

Your bearer, Rawul Din (who, I assure you, is worthy of the confidence you impose in him) will by this time be on his way to Bombay, which inconvenience to you I regret exceedingly. However, you shall have a servant. One Tambusami, an excellent bearer, will meet you in Calcutta. Regarding your own man, Rawul Din: he is, I am sure, a

most obedient servant and will carry out your instructions by waiting in Bombay.

Meanwhile, I trust you will have a most pleasant journey and will grow in both wisdom and prosperity.

Your humble servant,

SAROJINI NANJEE

When Trent finished reading the letter he smiled. He felt no anger, nor even chagrin; he was amused; he could picture with what satisfaction she penned that missive. She was as full of tricks as a street-juggler, this Swaying Cobra. Whether she discovered Kerth's true identity or only suspected he might act as a listening-post for the Intelligence Department, he did not know; he knew only that Sarojini Nanjee had outwitted the Government in the first move of the game.

The remainder of the morning he spent in making arrangements for his departure. While he was having his luggage removed from his room he saw the bronze-haired girl—a glimpse of white and gold as she crossed the portico. She did not even glance at him.

Two-thirty, with a sun glaring down implacably upon the dusty Cantonment, found him pacing the platform of the railway station. Suddenly he caught a glimmer of bronze, a familiar face among many unfamiliar ones. It may have been the advent of the train, roaring up in a cloud of heat, that made her turn quickly —and it may not. She hurried into a carriage, followed by a porter in a flowered chintz coat.

As the train puffed out, Trent drew from his pocket the envelope Sarojini Nanjee had given him and tore

off the end; read the closely written pages; reread them; made a few notes; memorized certain passages, and consigned the packet to ashes. One sentence stood out in his brain, in raised lettering:

. . . Thursday night to the house of his Excellency the Mandarin Li Kwai Kung, in the Street of the River of the Moon, which is in the Chinese colony at Calcutta.

It was Wednesday now.

CHAPTER V

INTERLUDE

CALCUTTA was luxuriating in the amber and blue of a clear day when Trent detrained in the Howrah Station the following morning; detrained as Mr. Robert Tavernake of London, in light gray tweeds, instead of Major Arnold Trent of Gaya, whose military trappings, with his identity, were secreted in a trunk.

As he neared the front arches of the building, with a porter in tow, he was hailed by a drill-clad officer.

"Hello, Trent!" exclaimed the uniformed one, whom he recognized as a former messmate. "*Quo vadis,* you old mummy?"

Trent, not blind to the fact that he was being eyed by a native in horn-rimmed spectacles and a pink turban, returned the greeting with a polite smile.

"Sorry," he said; "You must be mistaken" —and walked on.

"Crazy?" wondered the surprised officer, "or am I?"

He stared at Trent's gray back and sunburnt neck —and he was not the only one, for at least two others did.

As the porter put Trent's luggage into an automobile, the expected happened: the spectacled, pink-turbaned native approached, beamed upon him and spoke in suave tones, in English.

"You are Tavernake Sahib?"

Trent nodded. "Tambusami?"

The pink turban inclined forward as he salaamed. "I have a communication for the Presence!" he announced, extending an envelope that distilled an unmistakable perfume.

Trent did not open it, but thrust it into his pocket and instructed:

"Get in."

The motor car rolled across the Hoogly and deposited Trent and his involuntarily acquired servant at a hotel off the Maidan. There he dismissed his bearer.

"I sha'n't want you this morning," he told the pink-turbaned Tambusami, resolving to experiment with him.

And the native departed with a most profound salaam.

A half hour later, over breakfast, Trent read the note from Sarojini Nanjee. It wished him welcome to Calcutta and urged him to listen well when he visited his Excellency the Mandarin Li Kwai Kung—"who lives in that very poetic Street of the River of the Moon," as she put it. "I regret that it will be impossible for me to see you in Calcutta," she concluded. "Meanwhile, I trust you will find Tambusami an excellent bearer."

"Hmm," he thought, "if she won't be able to see me in Calcutta, where the deuce will she see me?"

Then he turned his attention to the "Daily Indian News," perused the closely-set columns while he finished his meal, and, after breakfast, set out for a stroll. He

moved north along Chowringhee, past green-grown gardens, and into a quarter where the streets swam in intense white sunlight and men and women of every caste and color pressed close to the flanks of harnessed beasts. It did not disturb him in the least when a backward glance showed him a pink turban following at a discreet distance; he smiled. When he had filled his pipe, he turned toward the riverfront. He felt rather in the mood for a tramp, so he increased his pace—strode on. He reached the Hoogly Bridge; followed Harrison Road. After an hour of steady walking he of the pink turban showed signs of weakening. Trent, perspiring freely yet not uncomfortable, suddenly plunged into a side street, made a series of turns and came out, eventually, near the Secretariat—without the pink turban. There he encountered the officer he had met in the Howrah Station earlier that morning.

"Hello, Ayrton," was Trent's genial greeting. "Sorry I could n't speak to you this morning—but too many ears were listening."

"So!" commented the officer, wisely. "You 're doing *that* now!" He shook his head with assumed gravity. "Government 's gone mad—madder 'n a March hare!" A laugh. "I suppose you 're shadowing Ghandi!"

Trent grinned and made an inconsequential remark.

"Here permanently?" he queried.

"End of my life, I daresay," was the gloomy reply.

"You can do me a favor, then"—thus Trent. "I 've a uniform I want to rid myself of temporarily; don't

object if I send it around for you to keep? . . . Thanks."

They chatted for a few minutes; then the officer entered one of the buildings facing the square, and Trent returned to his hotel.

He arrived hot and perspiring, and sat down upon the veranda to wait. And before long the pink turban appeared in the street below. Their glances met and Trent motioned to him.

"Why did you follow me?" he demanded, as Tambusami, sweat flowing from every pore of his brown face, salaamed.

"My orders, O Presence!"

"Whose orders?"

"The Presence knows!"

Trent thought a moment. Then: "I object to it."

Tambusami smiled broadly. "But, O Presence, it is for your good that I follow—to protect you!"

And knowing it was useless to tell him he lied, the Englishman dismissed him curtly.

Trent spent an idle afternoon. He did not leave the hotel, for he feared that he would encounter other acquaintances, as he had met Ayrton, and with Tambusami tracking him it might make more insecure his position. To be sure, Sarojini Nanjee knew he was Arnold Trent—but did Tambusami?

As he lay sprawled across his bed, enjoying the inactivity and listening abstractedly to the sounds from the street, a recollection of the bronze-haired girl insinuated itself into his thoughts. Subconsciously, he

wondered why the remembrance of her came to him. He had n't seen her since she entered the carriage at Benares Cantonment; did n't know whether she left the train along the route or in Calcutta. Queer that this girl should have crossed the border of mere observation. Yet, had he analyzed it, he would have known the reason. The world, that is, the great firmament of existence around his immediate sphere, was to him a scroll of faces. Now and then some countenance was lifted from the multitude—a swift glimpse of eyes in the dusk, eyes he would never see again, and for many nights afterward, when he sat alone with his pipe and the stars, he would spin webs of glamour. A quixotic person, this Trent. . . . The girl, then, was one of the lifted faces. Skin of old ivory hue, he mused, and hair —now, just what color was it? His imagination supplied a simile. Golden, with little flickerings of auburn—like firelight on bronze. The figure rather pleased him. Firelight on bronze. A contrast to Sarojini Nanjee. One the jungle orchid, blossom of purple shadows; the other . . . . well, the type one liked to picture at a piano in a dusk-deepened room, with hands gleaming pale as moonlight. . . .

Sentimentalism, he concluded. And dropped off to sleep.

2

Dusk had fallen when he awakened. He dressed quickly and went below. Tambusami was nowhere in sight; however, he suspected his shadow was not far

away. Doubtless the native knew of his appointment in the Chinese quarter, but he determined if possible not to have him at his heels. To this end he took an automobile part of the way, by a roundabout route; then, certain he had eluded his tracker, set out on foot to finish the journey.

An intense vitality lived in every line of his body as he swung along crowded streets, a tall, trim figure in white linens, smoking a cheroot with the air of a globe-trotter trickling through the evening swarm for no other purpose than to absorb atmosphere, instead of a man approaching an uncertain venture.

Native Calcutta was airing itself after a hot day, and a film of color and life unreeled in the early night. He passed two sailors from a British man-o'-war, younger by ten years than himself, clean-clipped chaps. The sight of them brought back the old dream—freedom and the quest for fabulous isles. He rather envied that pair, irresponsibly young. Always there, this dream, lurking in the subconscious, eager for some incident to draw it into the conscious.

From the thronged bazaars he turned into a quarter that was no less crowded, but with people of a different sort. It was as though he had descended into another world, a planet of dirt and filth and sin—sin in its nakedness, as only Asiatic cities know how to strip it of its glamour. A foul artery fed with the virus of the East—beings whose faces were mottles of yellow and brown and chocolate black upon the mephitic gloom. A woman in satin trousers ran out of a balconied house

and clutched his arm, whispering an entreaty; she cursed him in bastard English when he thrust her away. Something of psychic consciousness came to him from the street, as though fanned into momentary being were the sparks of old evil . . . . Babylon and Rome, and the perished cities of the Nile. . . .

Once clear of this humanity-clogged artery with its aura of ancient sin, he found himself in the quieter, though scarcely cleaner, Chinese quarter. Jews, Parsees and Chinamen; black and gilt signs; open doors that, like dragon-mouths, expelled the mingled odors of *samshu* and soy, of cassia and joss-sticks and opium; an atmosphere that transported Trent to the picturesquely wicked towns of the Straits Settlements.

The Street of the River of the Moon belied its name; it was no more than an alley and it slunk in the shadows of unpretentious houses. Its lights were dim, many-colored globes afloat on warm darkness; it was as mysterious as the numerous slant-eyed yellow men who came and went so soundlessly in its shifting dusks. After several inquiries Trent located the residence of his Excellency the Mandarin Li Kwai Kung—a dark, colonnaded pile. He jerked the leather strap that hung from a panel of the door; heard a muffled tinkle, the padding of feet. The door opened wide enough to permit a yellow face to peer out.

"Tell his Excellency that Mr. Tavernake is here," Trent instructed.

The door closed quickly; again the padding of feet. After a moment the yellow face reappeared. This

time the door opened sufficiently for Trent to see a house-boy in a slop-shop suit and a black skull-cap.

"His Excellency sends greetings and bids you enter his dwelling," announced the house-boy.

The door closed behind Trent. He was in a hall where a *dong*, swinging from brass chains, kindled an orange flame against the semi-darkness, where a stale-sweet scent clung to the air and gloom varnished everything.

The house-boy took his shoes and gave him straw sandals, afterward leading him through a series of doors to a corridor where the rich, stupefying odor of opium saturated the atmosphere. A sliding door was pushed back—a black door inlaid with characters in glistening nacre—and Trent stepped into a dimly illuminated area.

A lamp with a yellow shade hung by invisible means from an invisible ceiling, casting a pyramid of ochre light upon a figure that squatted on silken cushions beneath it—a figure arrayed in a loose yellow garment and the embroidered boots of a mandarin's undress. He was grossly obese, with drooping gray mustaches and oblique, beady eyes—a grotesque effigy made more unreal by the incense that floated up from a brazier at his side and wreathed bluish spirals on the dead air around him. Trent received an impression of sheeny hangings beyond the radius of the lamp; vases and gold-embroidered screens—a web of shadows, with, in its center, this gorged yellow spider.

His Excellency rose with visible effort, smiled blandly and shook his own hands within his brocaded sleeves.

"You will do me the honor to be seated?" he enquired, gesturing toward a pile of cushions opposite him. "My house is flattered that one of such fame should lighten it with his presence."

Trent waited for his host to be seated, knowing this to be a custom, then dropped cross-legged on the cushions. Followed the usual exchange of lilied words, of felicitations and compliments. Afterward, Li Kwai Kung struck a gong and a little rice-powdered, red-lipped girl appeared from behind the dusky screens, like a figure out of one of Pan Chih Yu's poems, and set a brass basin filled with scented water before Trent. When he had washed his hands the basin was removed. More lilied words, more felicitations and compliments. Then, a few minutes later, the first course of the meal was served.

"*Ch'ing chih fan,*" said the mandarin graciously—by which he invited Trent to eat.

Bamboo shoots, rice-cakes and honey; roast duck flavored with soy, seeds of lotus in syrup; prawns, sweetmeats, nuts and tea made fragrant with petals of jasmine. A very celestial meal. They talked as they ate, and if his Excellency clung to the custom of balancing food on his chop sticks and thrusting it unexpectedly into his guest's mouth, as an act of courtesy, he refrained from doing so on this occasion. Trent grew anxious to have the formalities over with. He knew he was undergoing a test; upon the success of this interview, he imagined, depended his future safety.

When the meal was finished, Li Kwai Kung asked:

"Will you join me with a pipe? . . . . No?"

A ring of the gong brought the serving-maid with cigars. His Excellency declined to smoke tobacco; instead he spoke to the girl in his own tongue and she vanished, to reappear presently with the requisites of an opium smoker—a lighted lamp on a tray, a blue jar containing poppy-treacle, and a metal pipe. The jar, Trent observed, was a piece of blue porcelain of the Sung period.

Then, after the manner of the East, which is to say, obliquely, his Excellency approached the subject of Trent's visit.

"There are certain necessary precautions," he began, while the girl twisted a black gummy substance about a needle and held it over the lamp, "before we enter into any discussion."

Trent opened his shirt and revealed a coral pendant chased with silver, lying against his skin. Li Kwai Kung nodded.

"And if I say, 'It is a wise man who holds his tongue in the presence of knaves,'" pursued the mandarin, "what would be your comment?"

"I would reply with the ancient wisdom of Lao Tzü —'By many words wit is exhausted; it is better to preserve a mien.'"

Li Kwai Kung nodded again. "*Hao,*" he grunted —and his guest did not know that was a signal for the house-boy, armed with a revolver, to retire from behind one of the many screens.

"It is needless, I am sure," the Oriental resumed,

"for me to caution you, who are about to start on a journey to the dwelling-place of *He-whose-wisdom-is-as-a-lamp-filled-with-much-oil,* that the discreet man questions himself, a fool others. You will tread the path of discretion, I know, for I perceive that the light of intelligence burns with much brightness in your brain."

A pause. Trent studied the blue porcelain jar. Li Kwai Kung took the metal pipe from the girl and inhaled; bluish vapor welled from his nostrils, half-obscuring his countenance.

"The arm of the Order is long and powerful, like Mother Yangtze, and its eyes are as many as the stars." Their glances met; no expression was mirrored in either face. "Yours is a great work to do," continued his Excellency, sinking deeper among the cushions and expelling smoke. "The Order will reward the faithful; they shall flourish as the willow-branch. The first step of your journey to the City of the Falcon will be taken shortly—and what sage was it that said, 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step'?"

The obese effigy smiled, pleased with his knowledge, and Trent felt that each word had its own hidden significance. Curiosity pricked him, like a needle flashing back and forth across the loom of thought. But he smoked his cigar and stared at the blue jar as if he had nothing weightier than the Sung porcelain upon his mind.

"As a man climbs a mountain by terraces, so will you travel to the city where dwells the Falcon, he who

guides the workings of the Order,'' Li Kwai Kung went on. ''There, having attained the summit, you will—er—see light. The next terrace of your journey is Burma.''

He withdrew an object from under the cushions and Trent looked upon a packet wrapped in white silk. The mandarin, placing his pipe in a bowl at his side, rested a contemplative gaze upon the silken wrapping.

''Passage for Rangoon has been booked for you on the *Manchester,* which leaves day after to-morrow. Here''—indicating the packet—''are all necessary papers. When you reach Rangoon you will take a train, as soon as convenient, for Myitkyina, where you will go to the shop of Da-yak, the Tibetan, and identify yourself by showing the symbol of the Order. He will furnish you with a *hu-chao,* or, as you would say, a passport, to a—er—higher terrace.''

He handed the packet to the Englishman, who placed it in his pocket. Trent's thoughts were revolving about what he had just heard—revolving and reaching no end. Myitkyina. Upper Burma. Were the jewels in Burma? But why Burma? How were they taken there? ''Under the protection of your Secret Service,'' Sarojini Nanjee had said. Were they hidden somewhere in the hills? Myitkyina. He tried to visualize a map; failed. . . . This City of the Falcon: in Burma? And the Falcon? Who was he? White or Oriental? . . . . Groping—groping in the dark—a purposeless circle. At least, this Order was no small one.

''I believe there are no further instructions to de-

liver," he heard Li Kwai Kung say. "Regarding the trivial matter of your—er—incidentals, I presume you have been told to keep an account and submit it at the proper time? . . . . No? . . . . Then do so, as it is the wish of the Order that you suffer no personal expenses. . . . Stay,"—as Trent made a move to leave —"it would be ungracious for me to allow so honorable a guest to depart without further hospitality!"

The little Chinese maid brought liquor—a sort of *arak* that, despite his Excellency's comment that it was a draught of the gods, tasted like sweetened vinegar to Trent. As the Englishman sipped the wine he continued to mull over what Li Kwai Kung had told him. The formidableness of the Order amazed him, troubled him not a little. This Falcon had a nest in Calcutta and Myitkyina. Where else? What of his brood? Why not, he mused, report what he knew to the Intelligence Department; let them swoop down upon these two nests; thus avoid any treachery that Sarojini might contemplate? An idea that he instantly dismissed, for to act prematurely was to invite defeat. He was under orders—and he had given his word of honor. Seek the root of the vine, the seed from which the Order flowered; then exterminate it.

Trent saw by his wrist-watch that it was nearly ten o'clock when he finally rose to take his leave. Li Kwai Kung lifted his corpulent person with an effort and repeated the ceremony of vigorously shaking his own hands.

"A sage once said, 'A man's actions are the mirrors

of his heart,' " was his parting remark. "And, verily, I have looked into your heart!" (Which, Trent reflected later, was a rather cryptic compliment.) "May you flourish in wisdom and wealth, as the blossoms of the almond tree flourish after the snows have melted and run down from the Yunnan-fu!"

Trent inclined his head gravely. "And may the Green Gods grant you the Twelve Desires!" he returned.

The house-boy appeared; his Excellency sank among his cushions, like a spider retiring to its gossamer web; and Trent was led back through the series of doors to the outer portal, where he exchanged the straw sandals for his shoes, and left the colonnaded residence—left a world of mystery for a world of noise and heat, of odorous reality and pale lanterns that reflected upon yellow faces and sloe-dark eyes.

He was a short distance beyond the mouth of the alleyway when a gharry rolled by. He started to call after it—an impulse born dead. It was not late; he would walk. Motion accelerated his thoughts. And he wanted to think.

As he strode along the street, fragments of the obese mandarin's conversation slid into his brain and receded, like waves gently insinuating themselves upon a beach. Casually (he had turned into a narrow highway of balconies, of swinging signs and Chinese scrolls) he noticed a white woman on the opposite side of the street—only noticed her, for he knew the type that haunted this quarter. He would have expelled her instantly from his mind had not she moved from the shadow into a

band of light that extended beyond a doorway; had not he seen her pause and draw away, as from a plague, as a Chinaman slunk past. The glow fell upon a face of old ivory hue, upon hair as bronze as the lettering upon the black scroll above her wide-brimmed hat.

He drew a quick breath.

The girl evidently recognized him as he recognized her, for she darted out of the band of light and to his side. Dark eyes looked into his from under the brim of her hat. She smiled, half with fright, half ashamed.

"I—I 've been very foolish," she said, much after the manner of a truant child. "Please take me out of this dreadful place!"

Trent did not speak immediately; grasped her arm; looked about; hailed a dilapidated carriage that was rattling by. As it came to a halt he said "Get in!" much after the manner of a stern parent.

She smiled again, that same half-frightened, half-ashamed smile, and obeyed.

Thus she of the bronze hair stepped from Trent's world-scroll into a sphere of more intimate association.

3

The girl was the first to speak.

"Really, I don't know what to say. I hope you don't think—"

"I think as you do," he interposed, "that you 've been very foolish."

She laughed tremulously. A voice as soft as a gentle monsoon rain—a voice that slurred over its words.

Wisps of hair were burnished by passing lights; her throat shone palely. Only the eyes were in the shadow —dark eyes, deep with mystery and a promise of revelations. . . . Old ivory and bronze. A picture of soft tones and colors.

"My brother would—well, I hardly know what he *would* do if he knew about this!"

"Your brother 's in the city?"—conscious of a lingering strain.

She shook her head. "I 'm alone, or I would n't have done what I did to-night—or what I 'm doing now. It was brazen of me to come up to you as I did, but I was frightened—terribly!" Then, with that nervous little laugh, she added, "But it was n't as though I were approaching a totally strange person, for—for I believe you were at the hotel in Benares."

Trent remembered his uniform and that now he was Tavernake—remembered divers things. He decided quickly.

"You must be mistaken about having seen me at Benares; but I 've a brother there—in the Army. Perhaps you saw him. He passed through the city today."

"Oh! Perhaps so!"—this rather frigidly. "What a striking likeness!" He felt her eyes upon him—those dark eyes. A moment passed before she said: "I must explain why I 'm here, at this hour. Of course it will seem foolish to you, but I 'm a tourist, and I wanted to see Calcutta's Chinese colony at night—oh, it had to be night, because I knew everything would be tawdry and ugly in daylight!"

It did n't seem at all foolish to him, only indiscreet.

"I hired a registered guide. He was to show me the temple of—of Kwan-te, I believe. Anyhow, he assured me it would be perfectly safe—and, knowing that it was n't, but rather enjoying the idea, I went. But I did n't see the temple. There was a street fight between some Chinese and Brahmins—Chinese and Brahmins *do* fight, don't they? In the confusion my guide disappeared. Perhaps he joined in or ran—I suspect the latter. I was so frightened when I found myself alone—and I—well, I walked a short distance—and then—then I saw you."

He realized he ought to say something to fill in the gap that followed, but he was not a man given to much conversation and for the time nothing suggested itself. Finally:

"I hope you 've learned a lesson"—grimly.

She laughed, and the nervous note had gone from her voice. Again he thought of cool monsoon showers.

"I 'm afraid I 'm incorrigible! Now that I 'm safe, I think I really enjoyed it. Being a man, you 'll disapprove."

"Thoroughly," he responded.

Conversation lagged for a brief spell. The girl took it up.

"You see, Mr.—"

She stopped and he supplied:

"Tavernake—Robert Tavernake."

"I forgot we had n't been introduced. My name is Dana Charteris. I was going to say that this is like a

fairy tale to me—some 'Arabian Nights' story. Since I was a child I 've wanted to travel—to see Aladdin's palace and Sinbad's islands—and now I 'm doing it. I lived in a town called Bayou Latouche, in Louisiana, U. S. A., and, you know, Bayou Latouche scarcely prepares one for this!"—with a gesture. "It reminds me of carnival in New Orleans."

"You 've not been disillusioned?"

"In India? No."

"Of course you have visited Agra."

"No, I have n't seen the Taj. It 's a frightful confession to make, is n't it?"

He reflected upon the question and decided:

"It 's rather jolly to find some one who 's traveled in India without seeing the Taj. Sort of different. But I forgot to ask where you wanted to go. For some reason I took it for granted that you 're staying at the Grand."

"That 's almost clairvoyant; I am stopping there."

When he had instructed the *gharry-wallah,* she asked:

"You don't live in Calcutta?"

Making conversation, he thought.

"My home is the world." Then, specifically, "I live in London. I represent a diamond firm."

Before she spoke he knew quite well what she was going to say.

"Jewels always fascinate me. Is n't it frightful about the gems that were stolen?"

"Rather," was the close-mouthed reply.

"Just fancy losing all those jewels!" she went on.

"My brother said they are worth millions or *lakhs* and *lakhs* of rupees, to be proper. I suppose it 's the work of this Chavigny who 's reported to be at large. You 've heard of him, have n't you?"

He answered in the affirmative and, inwardly, expressed relief that they were nearing the end of the ride.

"I can't ever thank you enough," she told him as they left the gharry and entered the hotel.

In the better light he saw her eyes for the first time and explored a new dimension of strength and dignity. He felt as though he looked into the rich glow of autumn forests, spaces of warmth and color and spirit—an initiation into the sense of discovery and lofty exhilaration that Balboa must have known when he gazed upon the shining expanse of an unknown sea. It was a glimpse into some high arcanum—to him new, but to the world as ancient as the tale of Cana of Galilee.

"I hope I 'll see you before I leave," she said in a way that would have made it impossible for him to misunderstand, had he been inclined to do so. "Good night."

He watched her go. . . . And when he reached his room and examined the silk-wrapped papers Li Kwai Kung had given him, she persisted in cleaving through his thoughts, in appearing from the pages before him and distracting him; and after a few minutes he rewrapped the packet and placed it in his trunk.

Long after he plunged the room into darkness he lay thinking—thinking of Kerth in Bombay, of his Excellency Li Kwai Kung sitting in his shadowy room, like a

yellow-bellied spider, and of the Order of the Falcon. The *Manchester* was to sail Saturday; it was Thursday now. Two days, an interlude; then the Bay, Rangoon and—

But would he see *her* before he left?

4

Morning and a hint of coolness caressing the air. Sampans and other craft rocked and crooned in the murky Hoogly. Gauzy streamers of smoke floated over the jute-mills of Howrah. Sunshine drenched the modern buildings of Dalhousie Square and Government Row; submerged the myriad bazaars and shops in yellow liquor; crept into the room where Trent was sleeping and aroused him with an impelling finger.

He dressed and went to breakfast. When he left the dining-hall his attention was arrested by a black straw hat with a sheaf of cornflowers and ripe yellow wheat about the crown. A tendril of hair glowed against the somber brim. She was talking with a native, an itinerant merchant; a string of beads hung from her white fingers. Trent approached from behind and spoke.

"He 's asking entirely too much for those stones, Miss Charteris."

She turned, smiling. He felt the same warmth in her brown eyes as on the previous night.

"You always appear at the psychological moment—or rather," she interpolated, "this time at the financial moment."

She returned the beads to the merchant, who took no pains to hide his displeasure at Trent's interposition.

"I 'm really glad you appeared—for a purely selfish reason. I want to buy some things to send home, and I know if I go alone I 'll be cheated outrageously. I wonder if you 'd care to go with me? However, I suppose that, man-like, you detest shopping with a woman."

"I don't object at all," he said.

"And you really have n't any business engagements?"

"I 'm free until to-morrow."

"Oh, you 're leaving Calcutta then?"

"Yes."

"So am I"—with a smile.

She raised a silk parasol of pongee-color as they left the hotel, and the sun reflected a rich glow through the fine texture.

"You see," she explained, "I taught music at Bayou Latouche and I promised my pupils I 'd send them each a remembrance from India."

He might have known she was a musician. There was a depth of conception in her that was lyrical, a somber yet thrillingly-alive tone, of which her eyes were the pinnacle-expression. *Andante appassionato.* Queerly, that term came to him. His mental portrait of the day before blended in with actuality: White hands brushing the keys in a dusk-varnished room; nothing heavy, some old song, redolent of recollections. . . .

"Is this your first trip to India?" he heard her asking. The clamor of Chowringhee was in his ears, but

her voice rang clearly through the sounds, an unbroken thread in the tangle of city streets.

"No. Mother India called me when I was a boy. I used to hunt with my father." That was true; for some reason he detested lying to her.

"Hunting! Tiger?"

He nodded.

"Is it true," she queried, "that there are mystics who walk in the jungles with animals—who belong to a sort of brotherhood of the wild and understand tiger and python and cobra?"

"The jungle has her own secrets," was his reply; "things that white men will never know."

"I heard a man," she resumed, "a converted Brahmin priest, lecture in New Orleans. He told of his boyhood; of the magic lore of the 'Mahabarata' and the 'Ramayana'; and of a time when an old priest—he called him a *Saddhu*—took him into the jungle at night, and he heard the many animal-sounds—the voices of the jungle. He said that once green eyes peered at them, so close that he could hear the quick breathing of the beast, and the old priest only looked into the eyes—oh, he described that look as so potent and unafraid!—and soon the eyes disappeared. I 've always remembered that. Since then I 've wanted to *feel* the jungle—and the power of will that can soothe a great animal. Yet I suppose Mother India, as you call her, is suspicious of us foreigners who try to pry into her secrets. And yet"—the brown eyes were filled with reflections—"perhaps she has a right to

be resentful, for men have maligned and misrepresented her so, credited her with false mysticism, with *Mahatmas* and cults of which she isn't guilty." Then she laughed—a little ripple that broke the smooth spell. "I—an outsider—talk as if I were intimate with India! Although sometimes I do feel that I must have known India before; a haunting familiarity. That 's why I came—to see if my visions were aright." Again the rippling laugh. "But I 'm sure you 'll think me an Annie Besant, incognito, if I talk on like this!"

"Not at all"—smiling. "I 'm interested."

"But you should tell me of India; for you 've hunted in her forests and wild places. Oh, it must be wonderful to know the world!"

"Well, I 'd scarcely say I know the world," he corrected; "only a few Indian and Persian cities—and some of the more southern watering-places of Asia. I was stationed for a while at Singapore."

"Stationed? You mean in the interest of your firm —or were you in the Army then, like your brother?"

"In the Army," he answered, again experiencing that insurrection against falsehood.

"I see," she commented. A wistful sigh. "I think I should have been a man. Penang, Shanghai and Zanzibar, those cities with such thrillingly wicked names, fascinate me; Tibet and inner China, all the far places, call. There's something pagan and magnificent about it—a sort of broken thread in me that matches the tapestry of it all. Oh, I 'm sure I should have been a man! I know if I were, I 'd be an ex-

plorer and hunt among the ruins of the Phœnicians and the Incas, and those other remnants of ancient civilizations.''

Her words brought a tightening of the cords in his throat. Another who dreamed of the fabulous isles! But, for a reason he did not analyze, he could not place her in the picture she painted. Always, to him, the music-room—white hands in the dusk.

''But I 'll have my fling,'' she continued; ''only in a mild degree. My brother's home is in Burma. I 'm going to live with him, and we plan to slip off every now and then. A trip to Malaya or Borneo or Java—I 've heard so much of the beauty of Batavia—or up the other way to Siam. Siam! Isn't the very name magic? Bejewelled dancers and emerald Buddhas and theaters where they pantomime ancient tales! . . . I 'm not a reformist in the least, but there 's one sort of 'uplift work' I 'd love to do—a 'purpose in life,' as some call it. I 'd like to visit the far places and return home and lecture to those whose boundaries are their own yards, and try to make them understand that on the other side of the world there are civilizations so much mellower than their own, and doctrines of existence that have nothing to do with mints and stock exchanges!''

Her voice was an expression of the high arcanum that he had glimpsed in her eyes. Here was a woman who possessed the rare triumvirate of flesh and mind and soul; whose gifts to men were other than brief summer passions and earthly donations. He felt that it was

irreverent when he asked if he might smoke. As he touched a match to his cheroot, she went on:

"Oh, the West knows so little about the East, and the East so little about the West, that it isn't strange that one misunderstands the other. . . . But I 'm boring you with this talk," she broke off irrelevantly.

"Won't you go on?" —earnestly.

She smiled. "It 's impertinence for me to tamper with mysteries that I haven't explored. No,"—still smiling—"I 'm going back to my ken—to Siamese dancers and pantomime shows. And that reminds me, is it safe to go to a native theater? I 'd feel as if I 'd missed part of Calcutta if I didn't see a Bengali performance."

"I wouldn't advise you to go alone." This soberly. "Too, if you don't understand the language, it would prove rather dry entertainment."

Another smile. "Why must a woman have such narrow man-made boundaries? If you hint that it 's dangerous, then you 'll intrigue me the more."

A recollection of the Chinese quarter flashed through him.

"If you insist on going," he said, and he, too, was smiling, "I daresay nothing can stop you—and the best possible thing for me to do is to offer my guardianship."

"It really wouldn't be stealing your time? Oh, it would be splendid! . . . . But you 're leading me by all these shops. Shall we go in here?"

It was an epochal morning for Trent. After the

tension of the past few days, he craved relaxation. This recess had a warmth and exhilarating intimacy that was a stimulus to him, and he luxuriated in it, listening attentively as the girl talked—talk that revealed little brilliant flashes of her nature—and drinking in the study of rich tints that her face and hair presented in the straw-colored light beneath her sunshade. He had the feeling of a seaman in port, a boyish thrill at the freedom from restraint; a few hours shore leave, then the sea again. He entirely forgot his substantial shadow until they returned to the hotel. The sight of the pink turban whipped him back into tension.

"At five-thirty," she said as they parted. "And I 'm sure it will be a wonderful adventure."

As she left him, Tambusami approached, smiling his ingratiating smile.

"I have news to report, Presence," he announced. "It is indeed well that I am here to protect your interests, for while you were away some one entered your room, and had not I appeared at the opportune moment he might—"

"You had him arrested?" Trent cut in.

"I went to your room, and hearing strange sounds within, I looked through the keyhole and saw a man —a brown man. Knowing he was a thief, I took the liberty of entering. He had opened your trunk—oh, they are clever, these thieves!—but he did not have a chance to steal anything."

"You caught him?"

The smile left Tambusami's face. "He was too strong for me, Presence; he had muscles like the unicorn!"

Trent considered a moment. Then: "Whose servant are you—mine or hers?"

Tambusami beamed. "*She* pays me to be *your* bearer!"

"Then say to her that I 'm capable of taking care of myself and that you 're to be my servant from now on and *not* my shadow. We 'll only be here until tomorrow, which no doubt she 's already told you, but until then you 'll watch my room instead of me."

Trent found the silk-wrapped packet safe in his trunk. Nothing was disturbed or missing. However, he surmised that the "thief" gained what he came after—knowledge of his, Trent's, destination. Was this the hand of that mysterious power he had felt in Benares when he awakened to discover an intruder in his room? But what power could it be? Not Sarojini Nanjee. Who? . . . . Plot and counter-plot. Each day fixed in him more immovably the belief that behind the activities in which he was involved was a sinister purpose, more stupendous, when revealed, than he imagined. Every new incident, like a hand in the night, lured him, beckoning, but never fulfilling the promise of disclosure. Adventure! And only one thorn to prick the joy from it. . . . Manlove. . . .

It came to him suddenly that perhaps, unaware of it, he was exploring the fabulous isles of his fancy.

5

They had tea at a restaurant in Government Place. She wore the black straw hat with cornflowers and wheat woven about the crown. White voile caressed slender limbs and fell away in a deep hem to give a glimpse of silk-stockinged ankles and suède shoes.

They rode along Beadon Street in a glamorous after-sunset glow (the car was threading through swarms whose sheet-like garments blended softly with the gray pastel of houses and the lingering rose-light) and Trent, eyes upon the girl, felt the sheer call of youth and romance at dusk. The very atmosphere was an electrode, drawing its current from the first white stars. Nor was Dana Charteris unreceptive. She was aware of a shielding warmth, and not of the physical, in his presence. The play of muscles of sunburnt cheek and jaw was vital and challenging, but behind that, more convincing because it was not visible to the eye, but to a sense of inner perception, was a compelling cleanliness; strength that had not to do with thews or tendons.

The theater was in a neighborhood of white houses and green palms, close to Beadon Square; their seats in an orchestra-stall. Over the pit hung oil lamps, round yellow moons suspended in cavernous gloom; dim electric lights in the ceiling; about them, a loose-robed, turbaned audience, the majority chewing pellets of crushed areca-nut and lime.

Musicians in white raiment filed in and played an overture, and the performance began. . . . . A tale of

chivalrous deeds and chivalrous days (thus translated Trent in a whisper, as the actors, flashes against the rich gloom of a back-drop, recited their lines); of Kurnavati, the Rani of Chitor, and Humayun, the Great Mogul. Bahadur Shah, so went the story, was hurling his armies against Chitor. The Rani had sent out the pride of the Rajputs, but they could not check the onrush of Bahadur Shah. Chitor was lost. Then the Rani, recalling a custom, took from her arm a bracelet and gave it to a servant, bidding him carry it, with a plea for succor, to Humayun, the Great Mogul. The servant departed. . . . And the first act ended.

"And you said it would be dull!" This from Dana Charteris when Trent had explained all that happened. "Somehow it makes me think of the Brahmin priest who lectured—a sort of thrilling mysticism; color and tragedy."

Just before the second act Trent glanced around the betel-chewing audience and saw—a pink turban. It disappeared as he looked, and he smiled at the thought of Tambusami crouching between the seats of the back row of stalls.

The second act was at the court of Humayun. The messenger of the Rani of Chitor arrived; presented the bracelet. Humayun, knowing of the custom, accepted it. By that act he became the bracelet-brother of the Rani, bound by custom to go to her if she called. Then the servant delivered the Rani's plea. And Humayun, who was a noble monarch, drew a jewelled sword from a jewelled scabbard and declared that the blade should

not return to its sheath until his bracelet-sister was free of the oppression of Bahadur Shah.

Thus the second act. There was a third; a fourth. Clash of steel upon steel; the clangor and strident ring of battle. In the last act Humayun reached Chitor—too late. For Kurnavati, rather than be conquered by the terrible Bahadur Shah, died upon the funeral pyre. And Humayun, borne to the walls in a golden palanquin, looked toward the smoky ruins and wept.

Trent, leaving the theater, let his eyes quest over the crowd in search of Tambusami. But he had gone. However, the Englishman suspected he would find him at the hotel, the essence of innocence.

"Now that you 've seen the Chinese quarter and a Bengali theater," he said as they rode toward the modern city, "what other reason can you think of to prowl about after dark?"

"I won't have another chance in Calcutta," she answered, smiling. "I 'm leaving to-morrow; and when I 'm with my brother—well, you know how brothers are. . . . I felt so sorry for the Rani in the play—she looked as I 've always visualized *Ameera,* in 'Without Benefit of Clergy.' Was that really a custom—the part about the bracelet-brother?"

He nodded.

"It was superb romance." The brown eyes deepened. "I shall always remember that story of Humayun and Kurnavati—and remember you for explaining it to me."

Silence of a few seconds followed. Then Trent ventured:

"I daresay I sha'n't see you again before I go. I sail to-morrow noon."

"Really? I 'm sailing then, too. I suppose you 're going back to England?"

"No. I"—he hesitated—"I 'm bound for Burma."

She laughed, a bit tremulously—that laugh of soft monsoon showers.

"Why, so am I. Surely you 're not booked on the *Manchester?*"

The face that was turned to her, faintly bronze in the street-lights, was impassive enough; his only expression was of mild, polite surprise.

"Yes—on the *Manchester.*"

His thoughts were swept by two currents, one shot with chill warnings, the other warm with the wine of anticipation. But for the incident of the uniform at Benares, the announcement that she would sail on the same boat would have done anything but disturb him. However, even if she did suspect his brother-fabrication, she could not guess his mission. As Tavernake she knew him. A few days more—a lengthening of the *intermezzo,* rich notes and chords of harmony to remember afterward—then, at Rangoon, the finale. *Allegro moderato.* . . . No harm, this Tavernake interlude; a cool breath to the being, like temple-dusk after arid desert heat.

"What a coincidence!" she remarked; then explained, "My brother lives in Rangoon. But he is n't there now. He had an—an accident in Delhi, and I came ahead to

attend to some matters for him. Oh, nothing serious happened to him, or I would n't be here. But it *is* queer that we 're going on the same boat. Don't you think so?"

And he replied in a manner that was new for him.

"Not altogether. It merely proves that Kismet had a purpose in arranging our meeting last night."

"A purpose?" she echoed—and they both were thinking different thoughts.

They were in Chitpur Road; soon Chowringhee; then the hotel. To him the throbbing of the motor car suddenly became the pulse of the night, of the hot street where, on either side, dark faces peered curiously at them. Subconsciously, his brain dipped back; he saw her beneath the black-and-gold scroll on the previous night. . . . Her voice broke in, a crystallization of his thoughts.

"I was thinking how foolish it was," she said, "for me to have done what I did last night."

"You mean" —he smiled— "in speaking to me, or—"

A whimsical laugh. "Both. Oh, don't misunderstand me! The thought just occurred that—well, my adventure might have turned out differently. I 'm wondering, too, if I should have come with you to-night. Instead of a jeweller from London, you might have been —anything. What I 'm trying to say, and doing it badly, is that after all we 're prisoners of instinct—at the mercy of elements that we have not the power to fathom!"

A pause ensued, and when she spoke again her tone

was one of light raillery, yet beneath it was a tense excitement that puzzled him.

"And consider. For all you know I might have planned that meeting in the Chinese quarter for a—a dreadful purpose. Even now I may be spinning a web around you!" Then, with a laugh, she switched the topic. "It will be pleasant to have an acquaintance aboard. Voyages are rather monotonous when one is alone, don't you think?"

Conversation was not at its best during the remainder of the ride, and at the hotel they parted with a few words, rather stilted words. He 'd surely see her on the boat. Yes, he must look her up. She had enjoyed the evening tremendously. A last glimpse of her eyes, of their luring mystery; then she was gone.

Trent did not go to sleep immediately. He lay in darkness and smoked a cheroot, puzzling over what Dana Charteris had said.

". . . . For all you know I might have planned that meeting. . . . Even now I may be spinning a web around you!"

Those words lodged in his brain, baffled him. There was something he could not understand, but none the less intriguing, in the still, obscure depths below the surface ripples.

6

Trent did not see Dana Charteris the next day. It was raining and Calcutta was gray and dismal. Tam-

busami appeared early and saw to it that his luggage was transferred to the ship. Trent felt that his very spirits were moist as he rode to the boat. Even his cabin was damp, cheerless.

Shortly before five o'clock the *Manchester* warped out from the jetty, her twin screws churning the brown water. Trent, looking out of his cabin window, saw Calcutta draw robes of rain about her and fade. The smoke-stacks of Howrah's mills were blurred fingers appealing to a stark sky; leaves, wind-whirled from toddy-palms on the mud banks, spun across the Hoogly; only when lightning scribbled a line of vivid lavender across the heavens was the gray monotony relieved.

The world was an old, old woman, and the sound of the steamer's whistle was her hoarse, stricken voice.

CHAPTER VI

HSIEN SGAM

NIGHTFALL found the *Manchester's* prow bearing into a thin mist. The rain had slackened to a fine diamond-drizzle; lightning no longer wrote livid ideographs upon the sky, but flashed far away in faded flares.

Trent did not see Dana Charteris at dinner, as he expected. "*Dummkopf Englischer*"—thus he was catalogued by a German merchant from Celebes who sat at the same table in the dining-salon and succeeded in drawing only monosyllables from him. The gentleman from Celebes was hot, damp and irritable, and he found fuel for his ill-humor in the Englishman who sat beside him and ate mangosteens with the air of one who liked such beastly heathen food.

After the meal Trent sought the smoking-room with a volume of lyrics, much to the disgust of his German dinner-companion, who, in passing, read, "Poems of Alan Seeger" over his shoulder. But Trent could not fix his attention upon the reading matter, and he sat with the book in one hand, a lighted cheroot in the other, and his interest nowhere in particular. He was suffering the first anæsthetizing effects of a drowsy boredom.

". . . . You 'll have to go higher than that if you

want to see me!'' rasped a voice close by, and there followed a click of chips, a laugh.

Clouds of grayish smoke, fanned into fantastic shapes by electric punkas, floated on dead atmosphere, personifying the languor that had suddenly quartered in Trent. A white-clad deck-steward slid through the vaporous whorls, serving frosty glasses of *arrica,* or whiskey and soda to those less favorably inclined toward exotic liquors.

''. . . . But surely, my friend, you would resent it if *we* sent missionaries to your country,'' a voice not far behind him was saying; a quiet voice that separated itself from the drone of conversation, a voice with a peculiar, alien note that caused Trent to wonder, after he heard it, why it had not penetrated to him before. ''Why, imagine the indignation of your—what do you call them, New Yorkers?—if Buddhist priests established a mission in that vast and bewildering city; if they so presumed as to try to press their creed upon those of another religion.''

Trent was possessed of a desire to turn; he merely sat expelling smoke from his nostrils, listening without consciousness of eavesdropping.

Another voice, quieter still and more reserved—an American voice—answered. ''The result of such a thing,'' it said, ''would be . . . . well, in the first place no Christian would. . . .''

''That is precisely it. Do you wonder, then,'' resumed the voice with the alien note, ''that we resent the intrusion of missionaries? What does it matter if

Deity is symbolized by Buddah, Mohammed or a Nazarene? God is one. No, my friend, you cannot convince me that it is better for my people to substitute your God for theirs. In other relationships they should be friendly, and they are, but in religion . . . . a colossal misunderstanding. My people are declining; soon, as a man of letters once said, the rust of our departed glory will corrode us and reduce us to the dust into which our empire has dwindled. Russian wine, Japanese greed and Western vices—a combination too strong for the slender potencies of our flesh. On the other hand, you Anglo-Saxons, Celts, Normans, Huns and Slavs will continue to build your empires; to fight among yourselves (there will be no war between East and West); to go forward in science and invention . . . . Yes, I am returning home."

The American voice asked a question. A laugh, selvaged with irony, answered it, and—

"No, I shall not attempt to 'enlighten' my people. I have studied in your universities, dipped into your learning; now, true to the blood, I go back. Perhaps, were you to see me in a few months, you would be shocked, for I shall be a 'barbarian'. . . . What? Satisfied? Yes, I believe I will. Your country has its dramas, its libraries—so very much—yet I could not but feel, when I was there, that the structure of your land is a—a *Frankenstein,* do you call it?—of self-stimulated delight, something soulless. Millions worshipping the false gods of body-pleasure; vassals of the

senses, ignoring the fact that there are hungers above mere flesh-appetite.''

The voice fascinated Trent, gave him a picture of deft fingers inlaying a mosaic; thoughts chosen with care and spoken as though filtered through many translations before they left the tongue in the integument of English.

''. . . I hope I have not offended you,'' the voice resumed. ''I feel no rancour, you understand, only an ache—a very great ache—over this colossal misunderstanding. . . . You must go? Then, good night!''

A chair moved. After a moment a man in somber clerical garb passed and left the smoking-room. Trent closed his book; placed his burnt-out cheroot in an ash-bowl; got up. And the quiet voice behind him asked:

''Your pardon. Have you a match?''

Trent turned. Whatever he expected, he was surprised at what he saw. An Oriental of no common type. He registered an impression of bronze, almost beautiful, features; a high, Mongoloid skull; dark eyes, veiled by an impalpable haze of tobacco smoke; moist, sensitive lips, rather thin and too red. Features that drew and repelled him in the same instant—face of a Buddha, and eyes. . . . He groped in an effort to understand the eyes. The man wore tweeds with the air of one accustomed to Western clothing, and he had a poise, a finish to the minutest detail of dress, that, in a yellow man, seems sleek and ''dossied'' to the eyes of the Occident.

"Thank you," said the Oriental, as Trent gave him a match.

The Englishman nodded perfunctorily and left the smoking-room, a picture of the bronze, beautiful face, lighted by the flaring match, engraved upon his brain.

His curiosity led him to the purser's office where he consulted the register. His eyes paused as they encountered the name "Dana Charteris"; roved down the list of first-class passengers to a signature that stood out from the others by its very *bizarrerie.*

"Hsien Sgam," he mused aloud. "Hmm. . . . Sgam—Sgam. . . . Mongolian."

And he went to his cabin to fetch a raincoat, still thinking of the bronze face of Hsien Sgam.

2

Trent twice circled the promenade deck. The faint drizzle had ceased, but there was a dampness in the mist that moistened his face as with spray. Yet he could not bring himself to the point of turning in. The scene exerted an irresistible fascination over him. The spectral pallor of cabin walls; portholes aglow in the murk; a gentle vibration underfoot; the *swish-swish* of the tide against the hull.

On his third round of the ship he paused aft, at a point that yielded a view of gaping cargo-well and the steerage. He could see the forms of steerage-passengers—amorphous blurs in the hazy night. A tongue of yellow lapped out from a bleary deck-lamp and licked across crowded bodies, groping stanchions and

hatches, touching twin ventilators that reared up, like phantom cobras, out of the jungle of human beings. Some one was piping on a reed flageolet—an eerie, tuneless wailing. He almost imagined the pink turban of Tambusami among the spot-like head-dresses below.

As he passed the wireless-house, at a turn of the promenade-deck, he caught a glimpse of green-shaded lights. A breath of tobacco warmly brushed his face; he heard the crackle of static trickling in.

It was not yet ten-thirty when he went to his cabin. He undressed leisurely, reflecting the while. Then, lighted pipe between his teeth, he established himself in his berth with a newspaper. But the restful churn of the engines had a somnolent effect upon him, and presently he tossed the news-sheet away, put out the light and settled himself for sleep.

And did not.

Of late, since the night he found Manlove in the ruined temple at Gaya, he had formed the habit of reviewing, after retiring, the incidents of the day. This habit clung. Sleep that a moment ago courted him, now evaded his advances. A picture of the Mongol created itself in illusive imagery before him. A woman's mouth—and a woman's hands, for the skin that touched his as he gave the Oriental a match had the feel of satin. Long hands, they were; but he fancied that beneath the silken smoothness was sinuous, fibrous strength. They . . . . But why in Tophet was he thinking of this Buddha-faced heathen? He shut his mind. But thoughts refused to be excluded from their domin-

ion. Nor could he sleep. His eyelids rebelled against closing, and when now and then he succeeded in downing their resistance, it was only to have them lift the next instant and show him the dim monotony of the state-room, relieved by the murky gray porthole.

And as he stared at the porthole, contemplating it vindictively, as if it were responsible for his wakefulness, it suddenly darkened.

When he became fully cognizant of the fact that a face was peering in at him, it had vanished—but as he sat up, his every nerve alive, he witnessed a second apparition.

The murk outside the porthole gave birth to a hand that sank into the dim obscurity within, then reappeared, stamped momentarily in relief upon the gray circle, and withdrew into the foggy gloom that had yielded it.

Trent sprang from his berth. As his feet touched the floor, he heard a thudding sound on the deck; a low exclamation; running footsteps. At the door he fumbled with the lock, then stepped into the cross-corridor vestibule-way and rushed out upon the deck.

A nearby deck-lamp shone in the mist like a nebula-ringed planet, shedding paltry light upon moist timbers and begrudgingly revealing a pale turban as it disappeared around a projection of the deckhouse.

And there was not only one turban, for another followed the first!

Trent threw a glance right and left; broke into a

run, his bare feet padding on the damp planks; paused at the corner of the deckhouse. A few yards beyond, a companionway spilled a plenitude of light. Voices came to him above the rumble of the steamer's screws; a woman's laugh. He stood motionless for a moment, hesitating; then, chagrined, returned to his cabin and switched on the light.

No recess from intrigue, even on the ship! Mystery ever at his heels. Was this another demonstration of the power whose hand he felt at Benares and Calcutta?

He fastened the wingbolts upon the brass-bound port-glass; pulled the curtain to insure against observation from outside. Not until then did the glittering object at his feet capture his attention. As he saw it a charge, as of an electric current, tingled the length of his body. It seemed unreal, impossible—until he picked it up. The contact assured him it was no vision, that he held in his hand a coral silver-chased oval with a broken clasp—the pendant that he had found in Manlove's dead fingers.

Cold anticipation settled upon him. He inserted a fingernail under the band that bound the oval; hesitated, stayed by a queer reluctance. He held what he believed to be a key to the mystery of Manlove's death. A single move and the name engraved within would be disclosed—the identity. . . . But suppose there was no name; suppose—

He pressed under the silver band . . . . and a knock sounded on the door.

3

Trent did not stir for a space of several seconds. Then, reluctantly, he placed the pendant under his pillow and opened the door.

A grotesque effigy grinned at him. After an intent scrutiny he recognized Tambusami—Tambusami, turbanless, blood welling from a cut in his cheek, but, despite the wound, smiling.

"I have him, Presence!" he announced.

"Who?"

The native looked amazed at what he evidently considered gross stupidity, and elucidated:

"The he-goat that came to your window! It was he who—"

Trent cut in. "Where is he?"

"There, Presence!"—with an indefinite wave of his hand. "By the wireless-house!"

"Why did n't you bring him here?"

"He is tied, Presence, to a—what do you call them?"

"Go watch him," Trent rapped. "I 'll be there directly."

Trent slipped into trousers and coat and made his way aft, up a flight of iron stairs, to the turn of the promenade deck. There, in the zone of greenish light cast from the door of the wireless-house, he beheld a startling tableau.

Tambusani, in the grip of two white-uniformed men (from the wireless-house or the deck-watch, Trent surmised), was protesting and gesticulating excitedly to-

ward a huddled figure by the rail. The latter was a native, bound to a stanchion with a pink turban-cloth the end of which was stuffed into his mouth.

"I can vouch for that man," Trent announced crisply, coming up. "The other fellow"—pointing at the native by the rail—"is a thief. He tried to enter my cabin. My servant happened along and followed him up here."

He saw, then, that one of the uniformed men wore chevrons of gold sparks; the other was a deck-steward. To the latter he spoke first.

"Will you call the captain? I want a word with him. . . . Thanks." Then to the wireless-operator: "I 'll take charge of this fellow now. And you might keep this affair quiet."

The operator smiled wisely (he did n't have to see credentials to spot 'em!) and withdrew into the room where the powerful machines buzzed and crackled.

"Now, you fellow," said Trent, removing the improvised gag from the "thief's" mouth. "Who put you up to this?"

Sullen eyes glowed. "Yonder devourer of pork lies, Sahib!"—with a venomous look at Tambusani.

"Son of a dog!" flung back the other. "Mohammedan whelp!"

"Stop it, both of you!" ordered Trent. "Tambusami, what have you to say?"

One hand pressed to his cheek, Tambusami explained.

"He is a liar and a thief, O Presence. It was he I

caught in your room in Calcutta—who got away from me! I recognized him as he passed me in the steerage—and I followed. He went to your cabin and—"

Trent broke in, directing a question at the suspected one.

"Do you deny that?"

"I am an honest man, Sahib!"—sullenness giving away to fright. "That body-louse is a sink of lies!"

Trent pressed on. "Will you tell me who gave you that—? Well, you know what you dropped in my cabin."

"I am an honest man, Sahib! I was walking along the deck and—"

"Whose servant are you?"

"No man's. My name is Guru Singh. I go to Rangoon to—"

"If you 're not a servant, then you had no business out of the steerage. I 'm going to have you put in irons, and when we reach port you 'll be taken up by the police—"

"No, no, Sahib! By Allah, I am an honest man!"

Trent reflected a moment before he spoke again. "You insist, then, that you did n't drop—something—into my cabin?"

"Yes, Sahib!"

The captain arrived at that juncture, a subordinate at his heels. Trent explained to him what had happened, adding—a shade too darkly, he thought—certain words that impressed upon that worthy officer his authority

to conclude with: "And I want him locked up."

The captain gave an order to his subordinate, who hastened away, and Trent addressed Guru Singh in Hindustani, which he felt certain the master of the vessel did not understand.

"You would rather be put in irons than tell who your master is?"

"I have no master, Sahib!"

"Very well. We will see how you feel about it to-morrow."

Shortly two men appeared and led the protesting Guru Singh below—but not before Tambusami had rescued his turban-cloth.

"It is defiled," he said, looking at it regretfully and letting it drop over the rail.

"Come with me," directed Trent. "I 'll take a look at your cut."

It was only a flesh wound Trent ascertained when they were in his state-room, and after bathing it in a sterilizing solution and binding it with an adhesive strip, he dismissed Tambusami with a brief commendation for his prowess.

"It is nothing, O Presence," declared the native, magnanimously. "With a lord who deals in magic medicines, why should not I watch over him, as a keeper over his cheetah?"

And the Englishman was not quite certain that Tambusami did n't wink as he went out.

Subconsciously, Trent had been thinking all the

while of the coral pendant; now it filled his mind. Again he felt the chill anticipation. His hand shook as he jerked aside the pillow; shook, as he stared in blank stupefaction.

The oval was not there.

As yet scarcely believing, he stripped back the sheet; turned over the mattress; searched every crevice of the berth. But the pendant had disappeared. It rather dazed him. Stolen. Once more a mysterious hand had reached out and spirited away the oval. One thing it proved: that there were two elements at work, lurking elements. But how swiftly! He was gone only a few minutes! . . . . Why in thundering hades had n't he looked inside before he went on deck? What a monumental fool!

Which verifies for the millionth time the truth of a certain fable about an *Equus caballus* and a stable.

4

The next morning in the dining-salon Trent saw Dana Charteris, merely a glimpse—a smile and a nod. She was at a table across the room. However, later, as he was moving toward the purser's office, he came upon her aft on the promenade deck, elbows upon the rail, eyes upon the steerage. She turned as his step sounded behind her.

"Is n't it glorious?" was her greeting, motioning toward the sea where the sun had painted a glittering dragon on the intense blue.

"Quite," he agreed, having forgotten the purser in

the eternal wonder of her eyes. "I hope you were n't ill last night?"

"Not physically. I was doing penance."

"I should n't think that would require all evening."

A smile. "Would you like to become father-confessor?"

"Perhaps."

She let her eyes rest upon him in a curious, contemplative look.

"How absolutely British!" she remarked. "An American would have agreed instantly, but you, being British, only commit yourself half-way."

"Is n't that diplomacy?" he asked, entering into her mood. She was revealing another side of her nature. Each time he saw her she unfolded more and bared to his gaze new and stimulating mysteries of her personality.

"Perhaps. But I sha' n't confess to you now—just for that. . . . I understand you did n't have a very quiet night."

The only surprise he betrayed was a tightening of the muscles of the jaw.

"Really?"

Her smile grew into a laugh. "Show some surprise, Stone-man, instead of trying to impress me with the fact that you 've suddenly acquired an interest down there"—her white hand flashed toward the steerage. "You 're wondering how I know it, and seething with curiosity. You would n't be human if you were n't."

"I 'm not"—forcing a smile. "But if you wish it, then how *do* you know it?"

"Well, it 's considered excellent marine etiquette to visit the wireless-house and worry the operator when one is bored—as I happened to be this morning in the interim between my rising hour and breakfast—"

"And as feminine charm is an 'Open Sesame' to the secrets of wireless-operators," Trent finished up, "this particular one told all he knew."

"Am I to accept that as flattery?"

"Is it?" he countered; then, eager to learn just how much she knew, he remarked casually: "Thieves are thick as mosquitoes in Asiatic countries."

"I know," was her unsatisfactory response, and, proof that a woman can be quite uncommunicative when she wishes, she diverted conversation into another channel. "I 'm afraid, Mr. Tavernake, I 've impressed you as being—well, a foolish flippant child."

His eyes met hers—barely a second.

"Why should you think that?"

She shrugged. "Oh, my endless talk of—of travel."

He took out his pipe, asked permission to smoke; filled the bowl and lighted it before he quoted:

> We are those blind fools who could not rest
> In the dull earth we left behind. . . .

She took him up: "Does n't it go on with —"

> The world where wise men live at ease
> Fades from our unregretful eyes,
> And blind across uncharted seas
> We stagger on our enterprise.

He nodded. While she was speaking he thought of the *andante appassionato* comparison. Music always—she was that to him.

"Uncharted seas!" she repeated. "They 've always lured me. I felt the call, but could n't understand it until I read a tale several years ago. 'The White Waterfall' it was called. It seemed to open magic doors. After that, 'Treasure Island' again, and 'She.' Stevenson, Kipling, Conrad and Haggard—they are the masters that taught me the doctrine of Romance and Adventure. Oh, I 've always wanted a crowded hour—excitement—the sting of winds not in books! I think after one excursion into the reality I 'd be willing to settle back into my peaceful alcove of imaginings. Then I 'd have food for my fancies—something to remember in the quiet that followed. Don't you think it would be alluring, in mellower years, to close your eyes and dream—of wanderings in the 'Caves of Kor'—or the time you spent on a pirate island?"

"It 's youth," he philosophized to himself. "Youth craving the open spaces; hours of breathless living!"

"It would," he said aloud.

"But perhaps"—her voice sank to a dreamy tempo—"perhaps I 'm having my adventure now."

(And many days passed before he understood what she really meant by that.)

Below them, in the steerage, a snake-charmer—a villainous-looking fellow with a scar across one cheek and a drooping eyelid—was making two cobras ripple to the sounds of a reed flageolet. The eerie, tuneless

wails were reminiscent of the previous night when Trent stood on the same spot and looked below.

"What would you think, Mr. Tavernake," the girl began, her voice very solemn, "if you discovered that some one whom you trusted and believed your friend was secretly striving for the thing you were working for. Would you call it fair competition?"

He applied a match to his burnt-out pipe, then regarded her—quite as intently as she regarded him.

"Are you making me father-confessor, after all?"

She laughed, thus ending a very solemn moment.

"Good heavens, no! . . . . But come, shall we take a walk?"

They tramped about the ship for nearly an hour; then he established her comfortably in a deck-chair and sat down at her side. They talked, mostly frivolously—conversation that only now and then carried a vein of seriousness. Not until after tiffin (he sat at her table, for she quite naïvely suggested that he have the steward change his seat) did they part, she for her cabin, he for the purser's office, which place he suddenly remembered as his goal when he came on deck earlier in the day.

He consulted the passenger-list, lingering over each name in search of one that might seem likely as that of the person who had directed Guru Singh's activities. There were thirty-one first-class passengers, the majority English, with a scattering of Americans; the only Easterns were, namely, an Indian gentleman (Dr. Dhan Gopal Singh, of Calcutta University, his signature

read), a Japanese and Hsien Sgam. Of the group only one seemed likely, and he by virtue of his name and nationality—Dr. Dahn Gopal Singh.

Trent then sought the captain and after a short conversation (during which he made a request that seemed rather extraordinary to the master of the *Manchester*) he visited the imprisoned Guru Singh. Abuses, threats, even promises of clemency, brought forth only: "I am an honest man, Sahib!"

His next move was to visit the steerage. A naked child with a ring in its nose begged for a gift; brown bodies lay asleep on mats; the cobras were still performing for the wicked-looking juggler. Stupid, unintelligent faces. . . . .

On the fore-deck a dark-skinned gentleman in European clothing was talking with the clergyman to whom the Mongol had expressed his beliefs the previous night. The former, Trent guessed, was Dr. Dhan Gopal Singh. One glance eliminated him as a suspect.

5

Toward dusk the captain of the ship approached Trent in his deck-chair.

"One of my men searched the steerage," he said, "and there was n't a sign of the ornament you described." Then politely, if not a little curiously, "Was it of—er—particular value?"

"It had its significance," was Trent's meager reply.

"It 's quite distressing, quite, to have thieves aboard.

But in these waters. . . . Is there anything else I can do for you?''

There was n't. And Trent went to his cabin to shave.

After dinner he and Dana Charteris walked another mile around the vessel; stood for some time in the bow, watching the flying-fish skim the glassy undulations in greenish, phosphorescent flashes; sat in their deck-chairs in the shadow of a looming cabin (and the spell of low-hung Oriental stars) and talked of inconsequentials.

For some time after she left, he sat sunken in cavernous absorption. He was aroused by a voice close by—a quiet familiar voice that asked if it were not a rare night. He turned to see a tall figure near his chair. Starlight dwelt on even mobile features, a high forehead, slender hands and eyes that looked inquisitively into his.

He answered that it was indeed a rare night. Whereupon Hsien Sgam politely enquired if he might occupy the chair next to Trent's. As he moved, the Englishman noticed that he slued slightly to the left—saw the twisted limb. The Mongol lit a cigarette. The flare of the match brought his face into ruddy prominence. In that brief moment Trent felt that ancient wickedness, refined to an exquisite degree, looked at him from beneath the bronze lids; then the match died and Hsien Sgam spoke in his quiet cultured voice, and Trent realized to what fantastic borders imagination can extend.

The Oriental asked perfunctorily if Trent intended to remain long in Rangoon, and ventured that it was a

very quaint city; and, quite as perfunctorily, Trent responded that he was n't sure how long he 'd be in Rangoon, and that from all he 'd heard it must be very quaint. Conversation threatened to pursue a dull course until Trent opened the subject of the political situation in Mongolia.

"Ah, Mongolia!" Hsien Sgam drew a deep breath. "It is there as it is elsewhere in the East. The Holy Lands, as you call them, are dead—sterile as eunuchs. Ghandi preaches—is *Swaraj* the word?—in India; China is locked in inner convulsions; Japan is a dragon with fire in its nostrils; Korea and Manchuria are but manikins that act as Tokyo directs; Siam, Indo-China, Malaya and Burma are the only peaceful spheres, and their people are children, thoughtless children. Asia has red wrath in her bowels. I am afraid for her. But Mongolia—you asked about Mongolia? . . . .

"The world moves in cycles," the Easterner continued. "It is the inexorable law. Asia was at its—er—pinnacle about twelve hundred and twenty-seven; then Europe. Europe is dipping; next America—and after that?" The slender hands shaped into an oddly expressive gesture. "The failure of Sultan Baber was the beginning of a slow death for my country. Now there seems but one future—that of a base from which Japan can operate in Asia. Japan must have food, too, and already the Szechuanese and other border people have pressed into Mongolia and proved it fertile. And we have unworked mineral resources. . . . "

"But Japan is apparently retrenching in her pol-

icy," Trent reminded him, finding himself interested. "What of the Allied Consortium?"

He imagined he could see a smile upon the Mongol's face.

"The Consortium is—forgive me—a bubble, a beautiful bubble with magic prisms and exquisite tints. Japan will see to it that loans to China are made as she wishes them."

"Japan improved Korea"—thus baiting conversation.

The reply came quietly, but vehemently. "Yes, my friend, Japan improved Korea. She scientifically reforested its mountains, built roads and railways, public buildings and sanitary houses. . . . But Japan slew soul to erect in its stead a structure without conscience or heart. Japan may improve China—but it is not for China, but for the time when Japan controls China and compels her four hundred millions to form a unit of her military organization."

Quiet ensued for a space. The myriad sounds that brew in the bowels of a vessel came to them—the jangle of bells, smothered by decks, and the ponderous, deep-throated roar of funnels.

"An example of Japan's purpose and her power is the cancellation of Mongolian autonomy," pursued Hsien Sgam. "When my people formed a government of their own, they expected the protection of Russia. But Russia failed. Semenov, the Cossack adventurer and agent of Japan, threatened invasion, and my people, frightened, appealed to China. The consequences you

know. Hsu Shu-cheng, with four thousand troops, occupied Urga. Hsu forced the Hut'ukt'u to sign a petition returning Mongolia to China. Later it was learned that Hsu's troops were equipped with Japanese money."

Trent settled deeper in his chair, his eyes lifted to the roaring funnels where volumes of smoke were sucked up as by invisible vacua.

"But there is a key to supremacy in Mongolia," Hsien Sgam resumed. "It is the projected extension of the railway from Kalgan to Kiachta. Whoever finances that, thus linking China with Europe, through Mongolia, will be the sovereign power. Will Japan—or your Allied Consortium? I think, my friend, the former—unless it is prevented. And how can that be done?"

Trent took him up. "How?"

Hsien Sgam did not answer immediately. Finally:

"Mongolia can assert her rights—by force."

Trent lowered his eyes to the indistinct outline of the Mongol's face.

"She has n't arms or ammunition or organization—and, furthermore, what good would a revolution do?"

Hsien Sgam answered the latter half of his question.

"It would give Mongolia self-government; and she could refuse a concession to any power to construct a railway through her territory. Organization? You spoke of that. No, they have no organization. But I have a dream—an ultimate—do you say Utopia? It is a union of the Mongols of Barga, the Buriats of Trans-

baikalia, the Chakhar tribe, the Khalkas, and even the Hung-hu-tzees, into a single unit—or, if you wish it, an empire. Tibet might be included. But that—that is only a dream. There is but one man who could possibly bring that about—and he is a pawn of China. The Dalai Lama. . . ."

In the pause that followed, the glow of his cigarette showed Trent an imperial profile—like a bronze head of some Mongol conqueror he had once seen. A queer analogy struck him. Timur the Lame, who seared Asia with his vitriol. But there was an alien element in the likeness that he conjured—dust on the reflection. It haunted Trent and eluded analysis.

"The Church dominates Mongolia," the quiet voice went on, "and the Dalai Lama is its—how do you say it, Pope? He lost much power when the English drove him from Lhassa, but after years of wandering he came into his pontificate again. However, the President of China had a purpose in restoring him. He knew the power of Tubdan Gyatso—knew also that he would be safer in Tibet than Mongolia."

They smoked on. Presently Trent asked other questions, about customs and people and history. The subject swung to literature. Hsien Sgam talked at random of Chinese philosophers and poets: Confucius, Mencius, Lao Tzü, Yang Chu, Kang-hsi. There were giant dimensions of mentality behind his speech. Every word was surcharged with restless energy; thoughts hot from the vortices of emotion. But, underneath, was a current of bitterness that surged up at intervals and

injected into his usual calm a passionate, almost terrible, intensity. It was more evident when he referred to his affliction.

"My father, who was a prince of the house of Hlaje Khan, believed that one of his sons should be sent into your world and acquire learning and enlighten the people," he said. "I, being lame and never entering into physical activities, was considered a student—and I was sent. Among the elders it was looked upon as an honor, but those with whom I played as a boy and grew up . . . . Well, in Mongolia, as elsewhere, virtue is in muscle and cowardice in morality. I went into your world and—I say this with no meanness—it hurt me. I took back wounds. Many things I was taught, among them a realization of the truth of a certain Manchu proverb about women. Yes—I wonder, my friend, why I tell you this, but perhaps it is the night and the sea—a woman entered my life for the first time—a woman who came as a leopard and left the mark of her claws."

As he talked on, unfolding with a readiness that puzzled yet did not fail to interest Trent, the latter closed his eyes and smoked, and imagined he was transported, through some reversed medium of metempsychosis, across a dead interval of time and was listening to the voice of Timur the Lame. The stars drowsed above them, like sleepy eyes, and the ship was a dim, prowling world when they parted.

As Trent undressed he reflected upon the conversation with Hsien Sgam. He felt that he had looked upon a tragic anomaly in the person of the lame Mongol.

Learning had refined his primitive impulses to a higher degree of intellectuality; affliction had warped his vision. Civilization, with him, was a varnish; he did not possess its essence. In a day less modern, when men were not so well equipped to kill one another, he might have risen to formidability; now, Trent felt, he could go no further than that group of idealistic radicals whose careers are meteoric, attaining little political significance and ending in the pathetic justice of a firing squad.

He wondered, too, if the encounter on deck was coincidence, or if Hsien Sgam had deliberately sought him. The Mongol would bear watching, he decided, simply for the reason that his own position was one of insecurity and tampering fingers might send it toppling.

Until he went to sleep the memory of Hsien Sgam haunted him, like the shadow of Timur the Lame cast down through the centuries.

6

Morning and another day of peacock-blue and gold.

After breakfast Trent visited the confined Guru Singh. The native was no more communicative than before but Trent did not press his point, for a better plan than blatant questioning had asserted itself.

When he returned to the deck he found Dana Charteris stretched out in her chair, her slim person a symphony in white.

"Good morning," was her greeting as she motioned

him into the chair beside her. "I reached a very definite decision last night."

He smiled. *Andantino con languore* this time. There was a refreshing draught in the mood that he instantly felt—light, golden wine to the senses. Her eyes were like liquid amber.

"Really?"

"Yes. I used to think that all Englishmen were cold-mannered creatures and quite indifferent to their wives, as fiction has it. I 've undergone a metamorphosis."

He continued to smile as he packed his pipe.

"Are you accusing us as a nation of polygamous practices?" he asked.

She made a grimace. "Please don't try to be clever or you 'll spoil my opinion—and you know countries are judged by single representatives. I warn you that I 'm in a desperately serious mood, despite all indications. As proof, I 've been wondering if too much travel, too long a sojourn in foreign lands, does n't affect one's ideas and philosophies—in other words, intoxicate one and leave a craving for the wine of exotic environment."

He contemplated the possibility that her remark was intended as personal; dismissed it; waited for her to continue. Which she did.

"Since you won't be human and ask why I think that, you force me to confess that I 'm leading up to a—a personal example."

"Namely?"

"Well—yourself."

Another smile; he lighted his pipe. "Go on."

"Really, would you be satisfied in a prosaic English or American city—after—all this?"—with a vague gesture.

He did n't know; had n't thought about it. Perhaps—perhaps not.

"I don't believe you would," was her opinion. "You 've absorbed a certain amount of atmosphere that has poisoned you in so far as living elsewhere is concerned. I should n't be at all surprised, either, to learn that you think Indian and Chinese religions superior to ours?"

"Are n't they?"

"Are they?"

"You, yourself, spoke a few days ago, if I remember correctly, of the philosophies and doctrines of the East —doctrines that have nothing to do with mints or stock-exchanges, as you expressed it."

"Yes. But now I 'm comparing the principles of religion—those adopted by our thinkers and real philosophers. Oh, we have our nobler types, who have n't been blinded by earth-dust! It may be a taint of the flesh in me, but I can't adjust myself to the belief that the ascetics and shrivelled yogis that I 've seen are the proper habitations for pure spirituality. If the manifestation is n't wholesome, how can the inner conception be? You would n't fill an unclean vessel with holy water, would you? It 's the methods and instruments through which the East voices its philosophies that I

rebel against. That which mutilates, or even neglects, the body, can't be a true religion. . . . But really, I 'm afraid I 'm getting beyond my depth. What I originally intended to say is this: occultism is dangerous to those of the West, minds and bodies of a different substance than those of the Orient. I knew a man who became interested in theosophy. After a time he entered some secret cult that had a temple in the Himalayas. It grew to be an obsession, and now . . . . well, he tried to touch flames that were not conceived for man-tampering and they seared him."

Trent chuckled. "In other words," he said, "you 're afraid I 'm a Buddhist or a Mohammedan at heart, or, if by good fortune I 'm not, you wish to warn me against exotic religions." Another chuckle. "It 's flattering. What other conclusions have you drawn?"

"Just at present," she responded, smiling maliciously, "I think you 're horrid."

He sobered. "Please go on. It 's like looking into your house from the neighbor's window. I 'm really interested."

"Or curious? Men who have not ventured into matrimony are, as a rule, inquisitive. And that suggests another question. It seems to me that one alone would be much more receptive to these"—she smiled—"these paganisms than one in union with another. Loneliness—that is, isolation—is food for heresies."

That showed him an old vista at a new angle. There was no misinterpreting her meaning. . . . Women. A few, but none of consequence; puerile passions and

brief affairs of the starlight, never the full ruddy glow of a riper devotion, the finding of the One Woman. . . . And again, that might not have been her meaning at all. She— At a sudden inspiration he spoke—before he considered.

"Why, no, I 'm not married, if that 's what you mean."

She gave him a queer look—half smiling, half vexed. There was a faint suffusion of color in her cheeks.

"I 'm not quite sure," she announced, swinging her feet to the deck, "but I 've almost decided that you 're impossible. However, I 'll leave you alone to decide for yourself."

And she did.

7

At dinner Trent sensed a change in Dana Charteris. She was quite friendly, even inquired banteringly if he were angry because of the manner in which she left him that morning, but there was, invisible, indefinable, a reserve in her attitude that forbade a resumption of the former intimacy. This troubled him.

Later, on deck, he was brought out of his reflections by the sound of uneven footsteps. Hsien Sgam approached. He was dressed in white and seemed to Trent almost grotesque—the twisted limb and the beautiful, yet strangely sinister, face!

In the course of conversation he asked Trent's business. The answer brought forth a short discourse upon precious stones. He then touched the war—inquired

if Trent had "seen service," as he termed it in a thoroughly Occidental way. Realizing that he was being catechized, Trent replied guardedly. In the East, quizzed the Mongol? No, on the Western front, Trent lied. In the infantry, Hsien Sgam assumed? Yes, the infantry. . . .

Of course Trent had traveled a great deal, he presumed. Well, a bit, the Englishman admitted. If it were not too impertinent (thus the Mongol) he imagined Mr. Tavernake had not always been "of the trade." He had the appearance of—well, a soldier rather than a "business man"; one eager for ranges and color and action, so to speak.

It was then that Trent became more communicative. He was rather a soldier of fortune, he acknowledged; intrigue lured him. But the Mongol was as wary as he, for, perceiving the change in tactics, he turned the talk into another channel.

A few minutes later he moved on. Trent watched him limp off and puzzled over this anomaly of a man. What was his object in catechizing him? He could not even surmise; but he determined to take a drastic step toward finding out.

His first move led him to the purser's office. Closing the door quietly behind him, he said:

"I would like to borrow your pass-key a moment."

"Sorry, sir," came the polite reply, "but it 's against orders. I can unlock your door—if you 've lost the key —but—"

"Suppose you call the captain," Trent suggested.

"Tell him Mr. Tavernake wants to borrow the key. I 'll be responsible for it."

While the purser was telephoning, Trent scanned the register. "Hsien Sgam—No. 227," he read.

"It 's all right, sir," reported the purser, hanging up the receiver, a new note of respect in his voice.

Trent circled the deck, assured himself that Hsien Sgam was in the smoking-room, then went aft to cabin No. 227. A turn of the key, a glance behind into the vestibule-way, and he was inside. He locked the door; drew the curtain across the window.

A thorough search gained him little knowledge. Only clothing and a hand-grip containing perfunctory toilet articles; there were no letters, not even a passport. Evidently the Mongol carried all papers of importance upon his person.

Hardly assured, yet satisfied to a degree, Trent returned the key to the purser and made his way toward his cabin—and as he rounded a corner of the deckhouse he almost collided with Dana Charteris. She backed, half in surprise, half in fright, to the rail, and gripped the white enameled iron.

"Oh!" she flared. "You *do* appear at the most inopportune times!"

And she stalked past him, entering the cabin before he could recover himself enough to speak.

Perplexed, he continued to his state-room. "Inopportune, indeed," he muttered as he closed the door—for as she darted to the rail he saw her fling something

overboard, an object that flashed white as it shot past the scuppers.

He sat down on the edge of the berth; filled his pipe.

What was she carrying that she did not want him to see? It could not have been of value or she would not have disposed of it in that manner. But . . .

He ran his fingers through his hair; puffed on his pipe.

Was it possible—? No, the very suspicion was preposterous; he was surprised that it should even occur to him. Yet, he acknowledged, a certain king of Ithaca believed in the beauty of Calypso. Forcing himself to face the situation, he reviewed his short acquaintance with Dana Charteris in a cold, scrutinizing light. The result was not altogether pleasing. Their midnight encounter on the portico at Benares was hardly reassuring, now that he looked at it through a different lens, nor was the meeting in the Chinese quarter, in Calcutta. . . . *Intermezzo!* Would it end in discord? He smiled grimly, confessing to himself that grave doubts (and, deeper than doubts, an ache that was not physical) had arisen from this new development. Had he been a fool?

He fortified his mind against such thoughts. What substantial reason had he to suspect that her interest in him was other than personal? (Personal! That word was fine ego.) The incident on deck— Well, he evaded, it might have been anything that she threw overboard, a handkerchief . . . or. . . . At least, he

would not be so unjust as to suspicion her—or anyone, he enlarged—upon such meager suppositions.

Only partially satisfied, he retired. He did not go to sleep for some time—and when he awakened in the morning, with the sun raining bronze needles at the blue sea, his first recollection was of the incident on the previous night. Considered in daylight, it lost its dark significance, but, nevertheless, made him vaguely uneasy.

This brooding discontent grew with the day. Dana Charteris was not in the dining-salon at breakfast, nor did she come on deck during the morning. He sat near her chair, waiting, his mind barred against either condemnation or justification. He would reserve his decision until he heard what she had to say. When she appeared (and it seemed that she never would) she could probably clear the incident with a few words, an explanation that would no doubt shed a light of absurdity upon his apprehensions.

But she did not appear, not even at tiffin, and he passed a restless afternoon. He walked the vessel from bow to stern, from bridge to the torrid depths where beings heaved fuel into her hungry stomach, impatient with the unseen forces that controlled his affairs.

He saw Hsien Sgam several times, but avoided him, for his mood was not a friendly one. A short interview with Guru Singh—who clung to the integrity of his honor—only served to irritate him, and a few minutes later when he came upon Tambusami, in the steerage, confabbing with the snake-charmer (he of the

scar and the drooping eyelid) he snapped him up in his laconic way for having removed the dressing from his cut.

(And it would not have improved his mental estate had he seen the manner in which the snake-charmer's afflicted eye watched him leave the steerage.)

The sun sank. Its sullen crimson bled upon cirrus clouds; faded with dusk; was absorbed as night bound the sky with gauzy blue and stars came forth to cool the fevered pulse of day.

Trent had just taken his seat in the dining-salon when Dana Charteris entered. White shoulders rose above the silver-cloth and flame-blue tulle of an evening frock. The startling shade of blue challenged out the deeper tints of her eyes; her pallor was made more lustrous by red lips and russet-gold hair. At sight of her he felt the blood throb in his throat.

"I hope you have n't been ill," he said as he placed her chair.

She smiled in a rather strained manner, he thought.

"I 've been a poor sailor to-day."

A pause; then he plunged. "I should like to have a word with you—alone."

She met his gaze unsmilingly. For a moment he thought she would refuse.

"There 's to be a dance to-night—you knew it?" He shook his head. "Suppose I give you—the third?"

"I 'd prefer not to dance," he returned solemnly.

"Then we 'll go on deck."

8

The night was blue and moonless; no ordinary blue, but the clear, rich shade found in the depths of a sapphire, and it poured out as from an invisible fountain, blending the sky and sea; it caught a thousand stars in its flood and they, like diamonds cast into an unstirred pool, pulsed with lazy insolence above the oily swells.

Trent, leaning on the port rail, pipe between his teeth, heard the throbbing violins cease. He straightened up sharply. There was a patter of applause from the main salon; an encore. He knocked the dottle from his pipe and sauntered nearer the doorway; there he waited impatiently for the encore to end.

Once more the violins ceased; a ripple of applause. But the music did not resume. Several couples emerged from the salon. Dana Charteris appeared as Trent was within several paces of the door; paused a moment in the frame, her hair glimmering in the brazen light. Then she saw him; joined him.

"Shall we walk?" she asked. He thought there was a tremor in her voice.

"Yes."

Their mutual inclination led them toward the foredeck. In the bow, beyond a monster coil of rope, they halted as with one accord. He stood looking out over the blue-black sea; she backward, across decks, at the huge funnels where smoke piled upward into darkness.

"Miss Charteris," he began, quite calmly, "I daresay you know why I asked for a word with you."

She was still watching the smoke. "I daresay I do," she replied, not so calmly.

He went on.

"I 'm going to be frank—even abrupt. Will you tell me what you threw overboard last night?"

Silence followed. The big ship throbbed, but it seemed far away, part of another world; in his sphere there was but the girl, himself and the stars. He thought he saw her shiver—although it was not chilly.

Finally she spoke.

"Before I answer, there 's something I must say. You are frank; I, too, will be frank." Her eyes shifted to his face. "I feel sure you 're aware that I am not so stupid as to believe your name is Tavernake—or that you are a—a jeweller. Furthermore, you know I saw you in uniform in Benares. Your story about the brother was—rather flat." She smiled faintly. "I 'm no child, Mr.—yes, I 'll continue to call you Tavernake. I have imagination; I have guessed you are engaged in some sort of important work—work that you must not be distracted from. At first, I did n't care—particularly—or perhaps I was weak. So I let myself drift along. It 's so easy to drift, is n't it?"

A new tone had come into her voice; a softer, more poignant quality. It carried to him a lofty exhilaration. He knew it was dangerous, yet, for the while, it thrilled him. The looming masts beyond the coil of rope were transformed, in his eyes, into the enchanted rigging of a dream ship.

". . . So I took the easiest course—because I found you interesting. Then it suddenly occurred to me that perhaps I was interfering with your duty. I knew I must stop. I resolved to—to end our friendship as easily as possible, without hurting you—or me. I hoped, after my outburst last night, you would n't try to see me again; that you 'd be angry."

She smiled; let her hand rest lightly, he knew unconsciously, upon his arm.

"You understand? To-day I was—well, afraid of you and of myself. I had my meals served in my stateroom. But I realized I had acted in a way that would seem strange to you; so I came out to-night to explain. If I give you my word that what I did last night is of no consequence to you, will you spare me the embarrassment of explaining? It *will* be embarrassing, Mr. Tavernake, very. Yet it was such a small incident!"

Her hand slipped from his arm; she lowered her eyes. Trent, watching her, felt that at last he had explored to the inner shrine of that arcanum in her eyes. He saw altar-flames there.

"Don't you think it wise," she resumed, looking up, "that we discontinue our association—not our friendship—now, to-night? To-morrow, in Rangoon. . . . "

Her voice died out in silence. They were quite alone, there in the bow, lifted, so it seemed, into a realm of blue starlight. Her face swam in the shadow, very close to his own. He obeyed an impulse. He took her in his arms; kissed her. Her eyes were closed, but an instant later the lids lifted. What he saw was not

rebuke, but surprise, astonishment. Vaguely, from that other world, came the strains of music. It seemed an endless period before she spoke.

"I—I have this dance. . . ."

She turned; paused, as if to speak; disappeared behind the coil of rope.

Trent did not stir for some time. Then it was to draw out his pipe. He lighted it calmly; inhaled the smoke. For at least a half hour he stood there, the wind in his face, smoking steadily. When he left the bow and moved aft to walk, to accelerate his brain, a figure emerged from the door of the smoking-room and joined him. A figure that limped, that fell in with Trent.

"I have been looking for you," the Mongol announced.

Trent smiled an amiable contradiction of his real feelings.

"Shall we sit down?" He halted.

"No. I merely wish a moment of your time to explain my actions of last night, and to ask a question."

The orchestra was playing, and the music came as a bitter-sweet reminder to Trent.

"Well?" and the word was almost abrupt.

"I presume you think me very inquisitive"—Hsien Sgam's eyes were upon him, watching him closely—"and I have been. But I had a purpose. I wished to sound you, as they say in America; to find out if your business connections were permanent, and—well, other things, too."

Silence followed.

"Suppose," the Mongol resumed, "I were to say

that plans for such a—you recall what we discussed the other evening? Well, suppose I were to say I spoke the truth: that there is a possibility of my dream crystallizing into reality; also that we need men who have had military experience, who can command. Soldiers of fortune, as it were, to cast their lots with a worthy cause. . . .''

Trent's eyes evenly met his. He smiled, very slightly.

''Are you—making an offer?'' he asked quietly.

Another silence. Then Hsien Sgam laughed.

''Perhaps I am; perhaps I am not. But if you are interested, go to the House of the Golden Joss, in Rangoon, to-morrow night. I will be there.''

And with that he limped off and vanished in the door of the smoking-room.

Trent stared after him. Presently he laughed, without humor.

Of a certainty, he told himself, there was madness in the night.

9

The *Manchester* swung into the Rangoon River some twenty hours late. Trent, who had risen early, saw the dome of the Shwe Dagon in the dawn, like a rippling flame against the purple haze. Before the ship dropped anchor, he sought the captain.

''I 've decided not to press charges against the fellow confined below,''' he announced. ''Let him go—but not until a half hour after we come to anchor.''

The captain, his eyes following Trent's receding

shoulders, reflected that he 'd see the blighter in blazing hades before he 'd let him off so easily. But, not being clairvoyant, he could not know that Trent had a few minutes before issued certain specific instructions to Tambusami.

Later, after Trent had concluded with the tiresome customs details, he saw Dana Charteris. She was preparing to go ashore. She wore the black hat with the sheaf of cornflowers and wheat about the crown, and her face, shadowed by the wide brim, had the pallor of ivory.

"I suppose I ought to say something," he began, halting in front of her, "but I don't know whether I want to ask your forgiveness for what occurred last night."

It was a strained moment, for both were painfully conscious. She averted her face.

"Perhaps," she suggested, "it would be better to say —nothing."

Then she looked at him; smiled; extended her hand.

Not until she was gone, a creature of white and russet-gold in the sunshine, did he remember that he did not know her address. This realization brought a new and enveloping sense of isolation. . . . Interlude! And this was the end—*andante dolento!*

CHAPTER VII

THE VERMILION ROOM

SUNSET, like the wings of a giant golden moth, quivered in the sky and beat gently against the city, stirring from the earth a film of dust that, illuminated by the lingering glow, hung in the air like yellow pollen. Gold was the sovereign tone of every quarter. In the Shwe Dagon numerous Buddhas smiled at the vain splendor of goldleaf and gold-fretted spires; Victoria Lake, on whose banks social Rangoon had gathered to cool after a stifling day, lay like a gold-chased platter; along the riverfront, dull brown water, shot with glinting ripples, swirled and eddied beneath quayside godowns, and in the adjacent bazaars a concourse of native life moved against a background of gold-lettered signs and gilt-painted shops.

This golden dust-haze enveloped the bungalow in Prome Road where Dana Charteris was packing a suitcase; floated through the window of a house near the waterfront where Hsien Sgam sat talking to another Oriental; irradiated the interior of the tramcar that carried Tambusami toward the commercial town; and glowed in a luminous cloud about a veranda of the Strand Hotel where Trent, lounging in a wicker chair, engaged in an occupation that might have cast some slight reflection upon the morale of the British Army.

Immediately after reaching the hotel from the steamer he had inquired about the train schedule, and was informed that to make the best connection at Mandalay for Myitkyina he should leave Rangoon on the noon train, reaching Mandalay at nightfall. From there, he was told, Myitkyina was a matter of twenty-four hours. Trent decided to remain in Rangoon until the next day; for he intended to explore the mysteries of the House of the Golden Joss. Having settled the time for his departure, he gave himself over to an inspection of the city. After tiffin he visited the bazaars, purchased a small leather-bound volume by Shway Yoë at a shop in Merchant Street, and now sat on the veranda of the Strand, waiting for Tambusami, whom he had not seen since he came ashore.

It was growing too dark to read, and he slipped the book into a pocket of his silk suit, transferring his attention to the variety of head-dresses that passed in the roadway. Pith helmets, felt Bangkok hats, Chinese skull-caps, loosely-knotted Burmese scarfs, and turbans of all sizes. . . . Darkness fell and street-lamps glowed into being before he abandoned his watch and went to dinner.

After the meal he returned to the veranda—and met a smiling, bespectacled Tambusami in the doorway.

"*Burra salaam,* O Presence!" was the native's greeting. "Was the Presence beginning to believe I had been swallowed up by this strange city?"

Trent drew him into one corner and sat down.

"Well?" —as he lighted his pipe.

Tambusami, after a wary look about him, made a gesture.

"I did as you directed, Presence," he began. "I waited until that filthy Mohammedan louse left the ship, and followed. Louse indeed, for he went to a place of stinks that would poison other than vermin! Fish and onions, Presence! He put such corruption into his belly! From there he walked about several streets that are as filthy as that stink-hole of a restaurant, then took a tramcar. He sat in front, I in the rear.

"At the pagoda, the great pagoda"—meaning, Trent knew, the Shwe Dagon—"he got off and defiled it with his presence. He went up to the top, where there is a great bell, Presence, and many images of the Lord Gaudama. Even the dogs in the stalls snarled at him! After he had tainted the upper platform with his presence, he returned to the bazaars below. There at the foot of the steps he waited, while I hid in the shadows above. Finally the one for whom he waited came—a Memsahib."

Trent's lips pressed into a thin line.

"A Memsahib," Tambusami went on. "She wore a veil and I could not see her face. She was dressed in white."

"Did you notice the color of her hair?" Trent cut in.

"No, Presence; the veil was heavy. But I saw a bracelet—oh, a very beautiful bracelet! It was gold and had a cobra upon it—a king-cobra, with hood lifted!"

If this announcement was startling to Trent, he suc-

ceeded quite well in hiding it. He smoked on in silence.

"I could not hear what they said," continued the native. "They left almost immediately. She had a gharry waiting in the road. I did not follow long. Am I a dog that I should run behind until my tongue drips and I drop dead of heat? When they disappeared, I got on a tramcar. Now I am here!"

Trent looked at him closely. "You heard the Memsahib's voice?"

"Yes, Presence, but not—"

"It was n't familiar?"

"Nay!"

Trent's fingers drummed on the arm of his chair.

"You should have followed," was his comment, after a moment. "Since you did n't, the only thing for you to do is to return to the restaurant. He may go back to-night."

Tambusami ceased smiling. "That stink-hole of fish and onions!" he exclaimed indignantly; then: "Very well—I am a faithful servant of the Presence!"

Whereupon he salaamed and departed, quickly losing himself among the many turbans in the street.

Trent continued to drum on the arm of his chair. The woman of the cobra-bracelet! And in Rangoon! That meant she was a passenger on the *Manchester*. But no, not necessarily. Damn the illusiveness of her! Who was she, anyway? Sarojini Nanjee? In that event it was likely Tambusami would have recognized her. Perhaps he did, was his next and disconcerting thought; perhaps the affair on shipboard was a hoax,

a foil for something deeper; perhaps Tambusami knew this and his story of the meeting at the pagoda was false. It was queer, he admitted, that Tambusami didn't hear anything that passed between the two. . . . But at least, he told himself, he was free of his perpetual shadow for several hours; he had not despatched Tambusami to the restaurant because he believed Guru Singh would return (if he had ever been there), but because he did not wish his own actions under surveillance that evening.

Still puzzling over Tambusami's report, he left the hotel. An involuntary glance behind showed him no familiar face, and he hailed a cab. (When the temperature is at ninety degrees one does not walk for pleasure.) The *gharry-wallah* knew no English—which was not unusual—and to make himself understood Trent had to solicit the aid of a Sikh policeman.

Hsien Sgam was the pivot of his thoughts as he rolled northward along Strand Road. His interest in the invited interview was almost wholly personal, for he felt that the Mongol's "revolution" was more a matter of vain dreaming than reality. Such a movement, unless backed by some power, could hardly be regarded as formidable. Yet the rebellion in South China in nineteen-eleven, which brought about the presidency of Yuan Shih-Kai, must have seemed puny in its first stages. Although insurrection in Mongolia against China would scarcely affect the interests of his Government, it was at least worthy of investigation. There was, as always, the possibility of infection—for the smell of powder,

especially in Eastern lands, is dangerous. It might spread into Scezhuan and Yunnan (there were already ugly symptoms along the banks of Mother Yangtze) or into Tibet, thus bringing it to the back door of Burma. And that "back door," he knew, was no small consideration. Since the occupation of Hkamti Long, the Kachin tribes of the Burmese hinterland needed but slight pretext to inaugurate trouble. True, they could be easily put down—"easily," he reflected grimly, meaning troops; death for hundreds in fever-haunted swamps and in jungles where lurked innumerable dangers. That was "black" country, up there between India, Tibet and China; wild people in a wild setting—dwarf Nungs, Black Marus and Lisus. Yes, they could be quelled, these primitive people, for a price. All of which, he concluded, was pure romancing.

He was in a street that ran parallel with the river, a highway where Burmans, Chinese, Hindus, Madrasees, Tamils, Cingaleese and Chittagonians mingled in a colorful, reeking democracy unknown to caste-bound Indian cities. On one side, beyond quays and warehouses, was the river, its dim expanse flecked with lamps on sampans, junks and lighters, here and there the white silhouette of an ocean-going vessel blotting the gloom; on the other, groups of colors that, like parrots, would seem gaudy and flamboyant in other than their natural setting shifted upon a background of low, swarth buildings and shops decorated with imitation lacquer and goldleaf.

Here was Burma, sleepy gilded Burma, with its quaint kyoungs and pagodas, its air of vain decay. A

siren of the East whose charms are fast being supplanted by the craft of her less attractive, but more industrious, sisters. They laughed and smoked, these light-hearted Burmans, while Chinos and Hindus moved with stealthy intent among them—grim, silent fellows, as quick in commerce as the Burmans are lazy and indolent. This was not the quiet of India or China, a boding hush, but an atmosphere of somnolence and perfect content.

Thus Trent was musing when he came at length to the House of the Golden Joss. It was a yellow brick building in a flagged enclosure, its up-curling eaves and series of roofs, to Trent, strikingly like the fantastic headgear of a lemon-faced mandarin who looked out with satisfaction upon the marine highway by which the merchandise of his sons floated into port. Curious eyes followed the Englishman as he paid the *gharry-wallah* and moved up the low stair to the entrance. There, after a pause, he passed between twin stone dragons; passed from the twentieth century, so it seemed, into a perished dynasty.

He found himself in a vast court where the smoke from joss-sticks hung in clearly defined layers upon the atmosphere. The walls were lacquered with red and gold; and black-enameled pillars, inscribed with ideographs, were joined to the beams by filagree dragons. Orange-colored scrolls, red and gold paper-prayers and blue pottery reflected bizarre splashes upon glazed floors. The draperies were crimson; great red lanterns, hanging from the ceiling like captive moons, added to the scarlet effect. Worshippers of all races and colors knelt be-

fore the altar and numerous small shrines, and the murmur of many voices in twice as many tongues hummed in the great red temple.

Trent's interest was instantly claimed by the blue pottery—tall vases, thin of neck and bellying out as they curved toward rounded bases and black pedestals. Red walls reflected upon their shiny surfaces. These vases were relics of China's Imperialists, Trent knew, brought from Honan or Chili—and his collector's soul flamed. Nor did he fail to observe the porcelain dragons or the intricate filigree work that adorned the beams. From these treasures he tore himself and gave his attention to the people. Mongoloid features, Aryan and Malay. No familiar face among them.

He pursued a corridor that led from the main court and completely circled the building—a dim passageway with many curtained recesses off from it. At one corner was a restaurant. He could imagine from the smells the sort of food served within, and he hurried on, returning to the temple where incense banished the less enticing odors.

At a light touch on his arm he turned. A gray-clad priest stood at his side—an emaciated Buddhist.

"Your name is Tavernake, *thakin?*" he asked in English; then, as Trent nodded, added: "Come with me."

Trent was led back along the dim corridor, past the restaurant with its pungent smells, to a curtained room in the rear. It was evidently a bedroom, for there was the customary *charpoy,* or bed. Its walls were vermilion; vermilion portières hung in the doorway, and a

heavy vermilion curtain defied any air to enter through the one window. It was close, stifling. The lantern swinging from the ceiling seemed a fiery ball that radiated heat.

"His Excellency Hsien Sgam will be here presently," announced the monk; and Trent did not fail to notice the title. "He begs you to accept the humble comforts of our hospitality until he arrives."

Trent's eyes followed the priest. As the vermilion portières fell together behind him, rippling gently, like red heat-waves, the last draught of air seemed banished; the room became oppressive, as though the lid of hades had been shut, and the odors from the nearby restaurant did not improve the atmosphere.

Trent dropped on the edge of the *charpoy,* fanning himself with his hat and inspecting the room with mild curiosity. He leaned over and drew aside the window-curtain. A warm current of air breathed upon his face. Beyond the rectangle was darkness—the back of the flagged enclosure, he surmised. A faint drone of voices was borne through the quiet—worshippers in the temple-court. Footsteps padded softly in the corridor; drew nearer; passed. . . . . Five minutes. . . .

Why the devil was Hsien Sgam keeping him waiting, and in this infernally hot room, he wondered?

Growing impatient, he rose and paced the floor, not ceasing to fan himself. Sweat streamed into his eyes, rolled down his body and moistened his undergarments. His scalp burned and needled with heat. After a moment he resumed his seat, staring at the motionless

vermilion portières. Still the hum of voices from the temple; it went on with maddening persistence.

"Good God!" he thought, as he mopped his face. "Such heat!"

He glanced at his wrist-watch. He had been waiting ten minutes. Confound Hsien Sgam and his revolution!

Suddenly his eyes were invaded by an alert gleam. That was the only change in his expression. He let his gaze rove about the room and continued the restless fanning. But there was something in his attitude, in the poise of his head, that likened him to a stag suddenly aware of an alien presence.

He had seen the vermilion portières move—very slightly.

Casually, he lowered his eyes to the bottom of the curtain. Two inches of gloom separated the hem from the floor, but that was sufficient to show him the toes of a pair of shoes. As he looked, they drew back—but not too far for him to still see them.

He continued to fan himself. Perspiration ran into his eyes and stung them, and he wiped away the moisture with a damp handkerchief. The heat seemed to press down, like a burning cushion, and quench his breath.

The pair of shoes moved closer. Another ripple of the curtains. Then, above the murmur from the temple, he heard a sound in the corridor—a *thwack*. Came a quick gasp, a low, sobbing intake of breath.

Trent got to his feet, swiftly. As he stood erect, the portières parted suddenly and a body slued into the room. It swung about drunkenly; went to its knees;

stretched upon the floor. A revolver clattered beside it. Trent barely had time to see that the body was that of a gray-robed man—a priest, who had fallen face downward and lay still, with an ugly blotch between his shoulders—before another figure slipped through the division of the curtains and thrust forward the muzzle of a revolver.

Trent halted. A flicker of recollection crossed his brain. The man who stood outlined against the vermilion hangings was a native clad in dirty garments; his turban was soiled, his feet bare. As Trent saw the scar running across one cheek and the drooping eyelid, he recognized the snake-charmer who crossed the Bay in the steerage of the *Manchester*.

The fellow grinned impudently, and the expression was reminiscent of another smile.

"Turn about!" he ordered softly, in English—excellent English for a street juggler, as Trent did not fail to notice. "Don't say a word; don't make a sound!"

Trent's eyes dropped to the body; lifted questioningly. Again the snake-charmer grinned—that impudent, strangely reminiscent expression.

"Never mind that now!" he said, and his voice, too, slow and quiet, seemed vaguely familiar. "If you want to get out of this place whole, do as I say!"

Trent turned, facing the window. (And the native did not see the smile that traced itself upon his face.) Instantly the Englishman felt a pressure between his shoulders.

"Now, drop out of the window!" came the whispered command from behind.

Trent moved to the window and pulled the curtain aside. As he swung over the sill he caught a glimpse of the juggler's grinning face. The sash was not more than four feet from the ground, and he discovered that he was behind the joss-house, in the shadow of a lofty wall. Above were stars; at one side, further along the wall, a gateway where the glow from a lighted street fell within.

"Walk to the gate," was the native's quiet order, as he lowered himself from the window. "Hail a carriage and get in. I 'll be directly behind you. Don't look around or say a word; if you do. . . ."

Trent obeyed. He moved slowly, almost carelessly, through the gate and into the street, where a thin stream of Burmans and Chinese flowed toward the joss-house.

It was half a square before he saw a cab; then, in a matter-of-fact way, he motioned to the *wallah*. As the gharry drew up, the slow, familiar voice at his side spoke to the driver—in Burmese, Trent imagined.

The Englishman stepped into the conveyance, showing no surprise when the juggler got in and sank upon the seat beside him. Nor did he look in the least amazed, as he should have done, when the native's drooping eyelid lifted and winked at him in an outrageously familiar manner. He only smiled—a smile that grew as he commented:

"You 're a downy bird, Kerth."

Which was not indiscreet, for one may safely assume, in Rangoon, that his *gharry-wallah* cannot understand him when he speaks English.

2

"I 've instructed the *wallah* to drive to your hotel by a longer route," Euan Kerth drawled, and Trent wondered how he was ever baffled by such a simple make-up; it was the drooping eyelid, he decided, and the absence of the waxed mustache.

"I want time to talk," Kerth explained. "Also, I 'll take this opportunity to return a piece of your property."

One slender hand emerged from under his clothing and extended an object that gleamed softly in the semi-dark, an object that caused the blood to leap into Trent's temples and throb there for a moment of sheer excitement.

For it was the silver-chased piece of coral that had twice been stolen from him.

"Too, I want to tell you," Kerth went on, "that your pretty cobra friend lied to you."

"Sarojini?"

Kerth nodded. "Most gloriously," he emphasized. "Look inside the locket—or whatever it is—and you 'll see."

Again Trent felt the blood in his temples. But his hand was calm as he pressed a fingernail under the rim and opened the pendant. He bent low; peered intently. He made no exclamation as he saw the name that was

engraved within—but his breathing quickened. He snapped the oval shut and sat with it gripped in his hand. The blood was still beating in his temples.

"As I told you," resumed Kerth, "*Gilbert Leroux,* the name that 's written there, was Chavigny's last alias. Therefore, when Sarojini said he had nothing to do with the Order, she lied. And if she lied once, she 's likely to do it again. Fact is, I don't trust her. I have a reason to believe she is n't playing the game just right."

"Yes?" Trent encouraged, while the name in the pendant sang itself in his ears with the roll of the carriage wheels.

"I 'll have to be rather personal," was the slow statement; "embarrassingly so, I fear. Nevertheless, it 's better that you know I know. Before I left Benares I sent a telegram to a friend, the Commissioner at Jehelumpore—you see, I knew you were stationed there at one time—asking if he knew whether—whether you and Sarojini Nanjee—well—"

He paused. Trent, smiling to himself, said: "Go on."

"When I reached Calcutta I received a letter from him by special post," Kerth continued. "He told me the whole story. . . . . That 's all. And for that reason—and because she lied about Chavigny—I believe you should be wary of her. Balked affection is an unruly mount to straddle, and when a woman plans to make a fool of a man because he does n't pay her any attention, and the man by his wits turns the affair so that *she* is the fool—well, I 'll say only that she 's

likely to cause trouble, especially if she has a Rajput strain in her blood."

Quiet followed. They rolled on toward the hotel. Trent was the first to speak.

"Just how did you do this?"—with a gesture that conveyed more than the speech.

In the semi-dark, unobserved, Kerth smiled.

"Oh, it was easy enough," he drawled. "I determined to have a look at the instructions you received at Sarojini Nanjee's house, there in Benares. I didn't quite fancy the way she gave in to your request to take me along. When we returned to the hotel, I left you for a few minutes, if you recall. During that time I filled an envelope with blank paper, then went to your room and while we were talking, under the pretense of getting a match from your tunic, I exchanged envelopes."

"And you returned it that night?" Trent put in, with a smile.

"Yes, I was your nocturnal visitor. I left on an express for Calcutta that night. When I got there I haunted the environs of the old mandarin's establishment. The night you called I hid in the court—back of the house and just beind the room where you two were talking. . . . . Oh, it was easy enough," he repeated.

"What about this?" Trent inquired, indicating the pendant.

"I intended to take a look through your cabin, on general principles, the first night out—and I happened along just as your servant and that other fellow staged

their shindy outside your state-room. When you went on deck, I seized the opportunity. I found the pendant under the pillow and took it because I wanted to study the design—and—well, for other reasons, too. I did n't discover the Chavigny alias until later."

"I had the captain search the steerage passengers for it," Trent said.

Kerth laughed. "I know you did—and I caused an inoffensive, fangless cobra to go to his Nirvana by hiding the thing in his gullet. I would have spoken to you on shipboard, but I was afraid of hidden eyes."

That explained the theft of the pendant on the *Manchester* (thus Trent to himself), but who took it the first time, in Benares? Kerth was evidently ignorant of that. Guru Singh was the key to the riddle, and he silently cursed himself for having released him.

"What did you learn about the design?" he pressed on.

"A little," Kerth returned carelessly. "I spent this afternoon at the Bernard Library looking up all sorts of deities. The one on the piece of coral is Janesseron, the Three-eyed God of Thunder—a *Tibetan* god." Then, after a pause: "There may be some significance in the fact that the symbol of the Order is a Tibetan deity, and then, there may not. I 've formed a theory, and unless I 'm greatly mistaken, you and I have a neat little sprint before we reach the so-called City of the Falcon. And if this city is where I believe it is, why, we. . . . But I 'm anticipating. Anyway, I have n't the time to pawn off my theories upon you. I simply wished to

let you know I was n't in Bombay, and to return the piece of coral.''

Another pause before he ventured:

''I suppose you 're not at liberty to tell me how you came into possession of that?''—with a motion of his slim hand toward the pendant.

Trent considered, then replied, ''Why, yes.'' And he told of finding Manlove in the ruined temple at Gaya. When he had finished, Kerth whistled softly.

''So!'' he commented. ''Chavigny at Gaya—but wait! When did I track him to the native *serai* in Delhi?'' He was silent for a moment. ''It was Friday,'' he resumed, ''no, Saturday—I remember now. And what day was Captain Manlove murdered? . . . . Monday—the twentieth? You see, then, that Chavigny would have had time to reach Gaya; but how in flaming Tophet did he get out of Delhi? You remember I told you I found blood-stains in his room at the *serai*. . . . . Hmm. This *is* a complication. D 'ye suppose Chavigny made a mistake—thought Manlove you? Yet why the deuce should he want to put you out of the way?''

A lengthy space of silence followed. Kerth took up the conversation.

''I have n't the slightest idea why you went to that joss-house to-night; however, I 'm glad I followed and'' —he smiled—''saved one of the eyes of the empire.''

''And I 'm rather glad you followed, too''—this from Trent drily. ''I sha'n't forget. I went there to meet a. . . .'' Followed a short description of Hsien Sgam, the Mongol, and an explanation of Trent's purpose at

the House of the Golden Joss. Again, as he finished, Kerth whistled.

"Complication upon complication! D 'ye suppose he 's one of the Order? I remember seeing him on the boat. What 's his object in attempting to murder you? It 's obvious that that was his purpose."

"I can't somehow adjust him with the Order," returned Trent. "He seems above that. He 's capable of villainy all right—rather exquisite villainy, I imagine—but I can't associate him with thievery and stolen jewels. . . . . Did you see the face of the fellow who tried to kill me?"

Kerth nodded. "It was the priest who took you to that room. Oh, he was shrewd—or rather, the one who directed him! He had a maxim silencer on the revolver; and if I had been two seconds later, you would have had a steel morsel lodged somewhere between your chest and stomach. I did n't dare waste time to explain there; I was afraid there might be others, and two white men in a heathen prayer-house would have as much chance as a pair of bats in hades!" Kerth glanced ahead. "We 'll be at your hotel in a few minutes," he announced, "and your shadow might be there, so I think I 'll make my exit now. I 'm leaving Rangoon to-morrow noon, as I daresay you are, too. I'll manage somehow to see you at Myitkyina."

He thrust one foot out of the gharry, upon the step, and stood there a moment, the reflection from passing lamps upon his stained features. He was smiling his satanic smile—a rather impudent, careless expression.

"I think I shall pay another visit to the House of the Golden Joss," he said. "What you have told me of this Hsien Sgam interests me in him. Good luck, major!"

With a wave of his hand he swung down and disappeared in the street.

3

When Trent reached the hotel he found Tambusami waiting, with no news of Guru Singh, and the Englishman dismissed the native and went to his room.

As he undressed, the coral pendant lay upon the table before his eyes and he stared at it fascinatedly—stared until the coral blended in with the silver and met his gaze like a monstrous bloodshot orb. . . . It was hard to believe that Chavigny was at Gaya, that it was the Frenchman who murdered Manlove. Chavigny—Gilbert Leroux. What reason had he to kill Manlove, unless, as he theorized before, the guilty one had been discovered at the bungalow by his victim and in the ensuing struggle the latter was stabbed? Or, as Kerth suggested, he might have mistaken Manlove for Trent, although he could think of no reason why Chavigny should desire his death. And there was Chatterjee—Chatterjee, who died with his secrets. . . . . Chavigny at Gaya! It was incredible. Of course the piece of coral might have been left as false evidence, a blind. But who, other than a member of the Order of the Falcon, would possess the ornament, and would a mem-

ber of that mysterious band have left the symbol to be found by the police?

Provided Chavigny was the murderer, would it not be natural for him to take steps to recover the pendant, once he discovered its loss? Perhaps it was he who stole it in Benares. But that did not seem likely, in the light of Guru Singh's actions. For why should Chavigny wish to return the oval to him? If. . . .

Then Trent had an inspiration. Was the attempt to kill him at the House of the Golden Joss the work of Chavigny? But what of the Buddhist priest? Chavigny might have bought him; paid him to kill Trent. To go further, it was possible that Chavigny was on the *Manchester*. Chavigny, an illusive personality, ever at his heels, like his own shadow! There was something intriguing in the thought. And it was plausible—plausible, too, that Chavigny, the notorious Chavigny, was the Falcon, the head of that nebulous order.

Theories, Trent concluded—only theories. He locked the pendant in his trunk and switched off the light.

As he lay in darkness, while lizards chirruped on the floor and the ceiling, a sense of cavernous aloneness enveloped him. It thronged with poignant thoughts. Manlove. . . . It seemed an age since he stood in the bungalow at Gaya that last morning. So much had happened since then—much to distract. Yet always, niched away in the subconscious, was the hurt, wearing deeper with a bruising force. Trent's nature was sterile for the average seeds of intimate kinships, but now and then—not more than half a dozen times in his life—

one fell upon fertile soil. There was something fresh and strong in his association with Manlove. (An essence thrice sweet in the memory.) Their personalities seemed to have entered into a mystic communion of comradeship —a bond not of words nor demonstrations, but feeling. That was why he felt so keenly the bruise of it.

Gone, too, was the woman who had materialized from his world-scroll into intimate palpability, bringing the rich gift of her presence—and leaving the bitter-sweet pangs of her departure. He would find her again, for she had fixed herself in the inner-penetralia of his being. But the period of waiting! . . . . Waiting—love's Gethsemane since the first simian creatures battled in the wildernesses of a still-hot planet.

As he lay there, reflecting upon these things, he experienced an ache, a sensation of isolation, that was reminiscent of his boyhood—of a night when a shadowy being of antiseptics and sick-room odors roused him from sleep with the announcement that the man who had fathered him into existence was no longer in the house.

It dulled only when a sleepy intoxication came over him, and as he surrendered to it he visualized, in a dim, hazy way, a falcon, and it lay in a welter of blood.

CHAPTER VIII

"BEYOND THE MOON"

AT noon the next day Trent drove to the station where Tambusami, having attended to his luggage, was waiting. The Englishman looked for Kerth among the travelers on the platform, but saw no one who even resembled him. However, he reflected as the train pulled out, Kerth might have changed his identity and passed within a foot of him without his knowledge!

When Pegu lay behind, he shifted his attention from the "Rangoon Gazette" to the endless panorama of paddy fields and scrub jungle. Yet he could not altogether divert himself. Invariably the landscape faded, to be replaced by the recollection of some recent scene: the court of the joss-house; the ride along Strand Road with Euan Kerth. But more frequently his mind was possessed with an image of starry luster and russet hair. The memory of Dana Charteris occurred suddenly, unexpectedly, in the very midst of other thoughts. She seemed a central force about which musings, retrospections and quandaries revolved. He found himself separating from their short association certain incidents and looking back upon them as through stained glass. He pictured her under the black and gilt scroll in the Chinese quarter; in the dusk of the Bengali theater; in the bow of the *Manchester,* beneath the

sprinkled flame of tropic stars. These portraits arranged themselves in a mosaic—an exquisite inlay of romance. Romance. He clung to the word. "The doctrine of Romance and Adventure—" She had said that ". . . . in mellower years, to close your eyes and dream of wandering in the 'Caves of Kor' or the time you spent on a pirate island." She had the spirit of youth eternal—youth with its orient mirages. He was having the Great Adventure now. Soon it would be over. And then? Back to the old routine—medicines and sun-scorched villages. (The thought was new, strange. Had he ever been a doctor? It seemed so long ago!) But in the years to come, at night, over his pipe, he could dream of it all. The memory of things—that was life's recompense for taking them away.

Shortly after seven o'clock he arrived in Mandalay. As he left his carriage, he saw a familiar figure—Kerth, scar, drooping eyelid and all; saw him again, an hour and a half later, when he boarded the Myitkyina train.

A perceptible coolness invaded the carriage that night, and when Trent awakened in the morning he looked out upon jade-green hills. The scenery, as well as the people who stood on the railway platforms, had changed. Great fern trees and immense clumps of bamboo grew on the hillsides.

Evening was pouring its dusky glamour over the world, and the far, misty ranges of the China frontier had purpled when Trent left the train at Myitkyina,

the terminus of the Burma Railway. He caught a glimpse of Kerth hurrying away in the twilight as he despatched Tambusami to the P. W. D. Inspection Bungalow to see if quarters were available there; and, after numerous inquiries, took himself into the bazaar, to the shop of Da-yak, the Tibetan.

The latter proved to be a languid person with a blue *lungyi* twisted about his hips. He inspected Trent with narrow, inky-black eyes, and led him into a back-room that stank of the hundred nameless odors of the bazaar. There he glanced lazily, indifferently, at the coral symbol that the Englishman showed him.

"We expected you yesterday, *Tajen*," he announced indolently, in atrocious English; and Trent wondered who the "we" included. "I am instructed to tell you to go to the Inspection Bungalow and wait. I will call for you later in the evening; in an hour, perhaps."

Which concluded the interview.

Trent decided immediately that Da-yak, the Tibetan, was of no consequence, merely a mouthpiece.

He returned to the station, where he had arranged to meet Tambusami. There he waited for at least fifteen minutes. The native was in a high state of excitement when he finally arrived.

"Guru Singh is here, O Presence!" he reported. "I saw him down by the river. He was in a boat, going upstream. I cried out to him and called him a liar and a thief, and he told me I was a bastard! The swine! He knew well I could not get my hands on him!"

"And you let him get away?" Trent demanded.

"What could I do, Presence? There was a Gurkha nearby, but I knew the Presence did not want the police to interfere with his business. Think you I would have let him go after he called me *that,* could I have prevented it?"

Trent was n't so sure; but he only said:

"Very well. What about quarters?"

"All is arranged at the bungalow, Presence."

Thinking of what Tambusami had told him, Trent left the station, the native at his heels. He wondered. Did Guru Singh's presence mean that the woman of the cobra-bracelet was in Myitkyina?

2

Just about the time Trent reached the P. W. D. Bungalow, a street-juggler with a scar across one cheek and a drooping eyelid made his way through the main road of the bazaar. His good eye was very active—as was the other, for that matter, although less visible to passers-by—and he swung along with his head cocked at a rakish angle, pack slung over his shoulder, flashing smiles at the copper-skinned Kachin and Maru girls.

Singling out a shop where boiled frogs, sweetmeats and confectionery were displayed to the mercy of insects, he approached, and, after purchasing a delectable morsel cooked in *ghee* (which he deposited in his pocket instead of his stomach), he announced to the spare Burman who lounged in the doorway:

"I go to Bhamo to-morrow, O vender of sweets, and I must take my brother a present. Canst thou suggest

what it shall be?" Then, before the other could answer, he went on: "I might buy an umbrella—or, better still, a turban-cloth."

The Burman came out of his lassitude enough to say that he sold very beautiful turban-cloth, and much cheaper than any other merchant in the bazaar.

"I want a nice one," he of the drooping eyelid asserted; "a white one, spotted like a cheetah, or perhaps yellow."

The shopkeeper had none such as he described, he said, but he had some fine cloth of red hue that came from a shop in Sule Pagoda Street, in distant Rangoon.

"Ah!" exclaimed the juggler. "I have been to Rangoon. It is a great city. Let me see the cloth of red."

In the course of bargaining, he said:

"Tell me, O wise one, is there in the bazaar a merchant who bears the name of Da-yak?"

The Burman grunted that there was and waved his hand toward a lighted doorway not far away. "There!"

"Ah!" exclaimed the juggler again. And he added, by way of explanation, that at Waingmaw, whence he had come, a friend warned him against buying at the shop of Da-yak, who was a cheat.

"All Tibetans are cheats," was the Burman's comment.

"Has he been here long, robbing you of your trade?" the juggler pursued.

"Oh, not very long," was the languid answer; "since

about the time of the casting of the bell in the pagoda last year. But his shop is not half so nice as mine. He is a dirty wild-man." Then: "Didst thou say, O traveller, that thou wouldst take the turban cloth for six rupees and two annas?"

"Nay, I am a poor man. For five rupees, O generous one."

At length the turban-cloth was purchased, for five rupees, and the juggler moved on. In front of the shop of Da-yak he paused, looked about tentatively, then strode to a spot just outside the door. There he unslung his pack. From a basket he produced a brass pot with a thin neck. Squatting, back to the wall, he brought forth a flute and began to play.

At first the music attracted only children. But before many minutes girls and men joined the circle about the juggler, and, as the group enlarged, a sinuous black body rose from the brass pot; rose and dropped back, like a geyser; rose again and slithered to the ground where it curled its tail into an O, and, with head lifted, lolled to the delirious piping.

"A-ie!" sighed the onlookers with approval—and drew back a step.

Presently a head was thrust out of the doorway of Da-yak's shop—as the juggler did not fail to observe—and, following the head, its owner. He squatted and indifferently watched the proceedings.

After the cobra had danced, the juggler performed many feats of magic, to the delight of the simple hill-people. When his repertory was exhausted, the audi-

ence moved on and he found himself alone with the squatting Tibetan merchant.

"I am a stranger here, O brother," announced the juggler, pouring the coins from his bowl into his hands and shifting them from one palm to the other with a musical *clink-clink*. "Canst thou tell me where I will find a bed for to-night?"

In the dim light the juggler studied Da-yak's features—thin lips, high, thin cheeks, and mere slits for eyes.

"Thou canst find a bed of grass under any tree," was his reply, covertly watching the coins.

"Nay! Am I an animal that I should lie upon the ground when I sleep? Hast thou no room? I am a story-teller and for a bed I will tell thee a tale that thou hast never heard before!"

"Nay, juggler, I have no time for stories."

"Then thy children?"

"I have none."

"Perhaps thy wife?"

"Nor have I a wife, either."

The juggler grunted. "Art thou a celibate that thou hast no wife?" He leaned closer, peering into the Tibetan's face. "Indeed, O merchant, thy face is like that of a lama I knew in Simla!"

Da-yak's slitty little eyes opened wider, showing small, bleary pupils.

"What is it to thee, O scarred one, if I have a wife or not?"

To himself the juggler admitted that it meant more

than a little, but to the Tibetan he said: "Scarred indeed, and afflicted of an eye! Seest thou this?"—touching the scar. "It is a mark left by a Dugpa's knife—in Tibet. I was headman for a Burra Sahib who traveled from Sikkhim, which is a far country which thou hast never heard of, to the holy city of Lhassa. From thence we went down, across many mountains, into Hkamti Long and the Kachin country. At Fort Hertz we followed the mule-road. That was many years ago."

"Thou dost lie," accused Da-yak. "No white man has ever crossed from Tibet into the country of the Hkamtis. There is no road there—"

"Then where *is* the road, indeed, if thou dost know?" interrupted the juggler.

"Did I say there was a road?" flared the Tibetan. "There is none."

"There *is* a road, if a road it can be called! For did not I travel it? By the Four Truths of Gaudama Siddartha, it is thou who dost lie!"

Da-yak's eyes burned with anger. "Why dost thou swear by the Lord Gaudama?"

Inwardly, the juggler smiled. "Why do rivers run down to the sea, thou dolt?" he asked—and made a mystic sign, a sign that is known to few.

Da-yak's eyes were no longer burning. But his inky-black pupils moved nervously under the lids.

"Thou dost make strange signs, O evil eye," he muttered. "How do I know that thou hast not summoned *Nats* to beset my shop and drive away those who might

buy?" He rose. "Go find a bed in the stink where thou dost belong!"

The juggler, too, rose. He spat contemptuously.

"*Kala Nag!*" he hissed; which means, "black snake."

And, picking up his pack, he swaggered off—while Da-yak, with an uneasy glance over his shoulder, entered his shop. However, the juggler did not go far. In the darkness of a nearby alley, from which point he could observe anyone going in or out of Da-yak's house, he sat down to wait. But not for long. Scarcely had five minutes passed before the Tibetan emerged from the shop and, like a shadowy cinema-figure, hurried off in the gloom.

The juggler got up. He smiled—for, figuratively speaking, he possessed a key to certain locked doors.

3

Trent was on the veranda, smoking, when Da-yak presented himself at the Inspection Bungalow, and without a word he rose and accompanied the Tibetan.

"We go to the river, *Tajen,*" the native informed him briefly.

A walk past lighted bungalows and well-kept compounds brought them to the river—the mighty Irrawaddi, flowing down from mountain heights, past dead kingdoms and into tropical seas. A slim saber of a moon was swinging up over the hills as they came within sight of the stream. It showered the water with a wealth of silver coins that collected into a band, and, shimmering and coruscating, stretched from the remote

shore to the sharply etched Kachin rafts and country-boats beneath the Myitkyina bank.

Into one of the smaller boats Da-yak led Trent. Two boatmen, both in turban, jacket and *lungyi,* stepped lazily into the craft, and one shoved off while the other crawled forward and plied his paddle, guiding the boat into midstream and turning its prow with the current. The smell of the jungle, warm, fragrant odors, hung in the air, and the rhythmic dip of the paddle, with the sucking sounds produced by the water as it slapped the sides, only italicized the silence.

Trent, lounging among cushions amidships, let his eyes follow Da-yak, who moved forward and took the paddle from the boatman. The latter, with a murmured word, rose and crawled toward Trent.

"I would sit beside you, Sahib," he announced in a soft voice.

Trent stared—and the boatman laughed, a sweet laugh that rippled low in the throat; laughed, and sank upon the pillows beside the man whose breathing had grown a trifle faster as he inhaled the perfume of sandalwood.

"You are surprised?" asked Sarojini Nanjee, quite pleased with the effect of her sudden appearance.

He smiled. "You are clever."

The woman clasped her hands behind her head and regarded him. The night made secret certain of her features, for whereas the moon shone full upon her face, softening the contours, her eyes were hid in dim mystery. Thus, when she looked at him, (as she was

doing every second) he could not see her eyes. Which seemed to please her, for she lay back upon the cushions, smiling, an insolently boyish figure.

"Did not you find Tambusami an excellent bearer?" was her next query—and he imagined her eyes were mocking him.

"Quite"—rather drily.

"Yet he cannot equal your Rawul Din," she went on. "He is a perfect example of careful tutoring."

She leaned closer, so close that the warmth of her breath was on his lips, and her eyes, like black opals, burned near to his.

"I wonder, man of wits, how many bearers would think to do what your Rawul Din did, that night at my house?" Then she laughed and drew away; and the musical peals were reminiscent of shattered crystals. "I *should* be angry—for why did you spy upon me?"

"I don't understand"—this from him.

"No?"—with irony. "Am I so dull that I do not understand when I find a pool of wine under a divan? Oh, he was clever, very clever; but I was more clever!"

Trent wondered how much she knew. He felt sure she could not have guessed the truth, for the discovery that Delhi was keeping a finger on her would undoubtedly have angered her.

"Surely you would like to know how I came here," she announced. "Why not inquire?"

"I was instructed to ask no questions," he reminded.

She nodded that queer little nod of hers.

"You obey well—when you wish to. But we have no

time now to talk of the past; suffice to say I come and go like the wind, when and where I will, and depending upon no man.''

She settled deeper among the cushions and watched him—watched him half-humorously, as though he belonged to her and she was undecided what to do with him next. He realized she was waiting for him to speak, that she wanted to find out what he had learned since their meeting at Benares. Therefore he resolved to keep silent, not that what he knew was of any significance, but because uncertainty on her part was his best weapon. So he drew into his shell and waited. When she could no longer endure it, she said:

''Now that you are here, have you no thought of what you are to do?''

''There 's a platitude about anticipation,'' was his reply. ''Preconceived ideas never are correct.''

''You, of course, suspected Myitkyina was not the end of your journey?''

''Then it is n't?''

He could not see her eyes, but he knew she was looking at him closely.

''Did not his Excellency Li Kwai Kung speak of certain terraces, each a step toward enlightenment?''

He nodded. ''Is the City of the Falcon the next?''

''Ultimately,'' she modified.

''When do I start—or do *we?*''

She shook her head. ''*You* start to-morrow.'' Then, following a pause: ''Previous to this you have been under my direct observation and protection.'' That

made him smile to himself. "I can no longer do that. Certain threads will be placed in your hands and you will be left to untangle them. And it will not be easy. That is why I chose you."

The boatman had ceased paddling, and they drifted with the current in silence that was like a presence. Now and then a gibbon called from the bank; frequently fish leaped above the water, breaking the moon's path into silver fragments.

"Oh, it is far from easy!" she continued. "You will pass through a stretch of country where no Englishman has been. There will be discomforts—yes, dangers. The jungle knows how to torment white men. Death in a hundred guises waits for the unwary; death in the poison swamps, in the bush; death everywhere!" She straightened up, and her hand closed over his. "There will be times when you will curse me for having sent you! Yet in the end there is reward! Glory! Honor! Your name will sweep from one end of the empire to the other!" Then she drew a sharp breath, for she divined what was in his mind. "You believe I lie? But I speak the truth, before all the gods! Yonder" —with a wave of her hand—"beyond the moon, it lies, this city where the Falcon nests with the treasures of Ind!"

"You mean the jewels passed through Myitkyina?" he questioned, trying to speak casually, as though it were a spontaneous query rather than a studied interrogation.

"Ah! Did I say so?" she fenced. "Nay! I will

not answer that! Perhaps they did; perhaps they did not." (Trent was more inclined to believe the latter.) "However, they are there, beyond the moon, and every one shall be returned, down to the smallest pearl!"

It sounded rather preposterous to him. How could this thing be accomplished by two people? Was she playing with him? She 'd hardly dare. She might risk it, were he alone, but with the Government of India behind him a false move on her part would be her own defeat. Yet he could not disassociate her from some hidden, not altogether pleasant, purpose.

"Aye!" she resumed. "You and I"—and her fingers tightened about his hand—"shall do what the Secret Service could never do! We shall go where they could never go! We shall understand things that they could never understand! We are blessed of the gods, you and I! We shall pluck the Falcon's pinions; rob his nest. And, oh, it will be a great jest, a very great jest! If you only knew, you would laugh with me! But not yet. It would spoil the secret to tell it now."

"Yet you can tell me now," he suggested, "how far this Falcon's nest is?"

She inclined her head. "Yes, I can tell you that now." And her answer was as fantastic as the city itself: "It is nearly eight hundred miles."

Inwardly, he started. A moment passed before he spoke.

"Nearly eight hundred miles," he repeated, picturing as accurately as possible a map. "Traveling west of Myitkyina that would take us beyond the Brahma-

putra; east, into China—about upper Yunnan or Kwei-chow; and north—well, the Tibetan *border* is three hundred miles from Myitkyina. Which is it: north, east or west?"

"Which seems the most likely? In which of the three regions would the Falcon's nest be in less danger of discovery by blundering British agents?"

He had guessed, but he did not wish to commit himself. He deliberately chose—

"Beyond the Brahmaputra?"

She laughed. "You are no fool. The moment I said nearly eight hundred miles you knew I meant Tibet."

He considered for some time. Then: "That 's impossible." Subconsciously, he was thinking of the coral pendant. . . . . Janesseron, a Tibetan god. Nor had he forgotten what Kerth told him in Rangoon.

"What is impossible?"

"Tibet."

She chose to smile at that. Apparently she enjoyed the astonishment that he made no effort to conceal.

"There is a way and a means for everything! Whither goes the elephant when his time is come? Does man know?" She shrugged. "Oh, it is a strange planet, this!"

She drew something white from beneath her jacket—something that crackled as she unfolded it and spread it upon her knees. The moonlight showed him the faint tracery of a map.

"Bend closer," she directed. "See, here is Myitky-

ina''—her finger rested on a tiny dot. ''Above is the confluence of the Irrawaddi. The Mali-hka flows northeast, the 'Nmai-hka northwest. You will follow a route in the triangular space between the two rivers, in a territory where Government surveyors have never been. At the edge of the Duleng country you cross the 'Nmai-hka and go eastward to a town across the Chinese border, in Yunnan. It is called Tali-fang, and is under the administration of a military governor, the *Tchentai.* Just beyond Tali-fang is the Yolon-noi Pass into Tibet. And there''—she touched a blank space in Tibet, in the northwest corner of Kham—''is the City of the Falcon. Its name is Shingtse-lunpo.''

That conveyed nothing to Trent. But its situation did. In Tibet, between the sources of the Brahmaputra and the Mekong! It was as incredible as if she had informed him he was to go to the moon. Her figure of speech was not amiss—''Beyond the moon.'' That territory was as nebulous as the regions of the moon, as weirdly unreal. It was the country toward which Mohut, the explorer, had striven, which Prince Henri d'Orleans had skirted.

''From Myitkyina,'' he heard Sarojini Nanjee saying, ''to Tali-fang, you will be guided by a Lisu; there will be porters, of course. At Tali-fang you must call at the *Yamen* of the *Tchentai,* who will furnish fresh mules and supplies. There you will also exchange your porters and guide for Tibetan caravaneers. A passport is necessary to enter Shingtse-lunpo, but that will be pro-

vided. Once inside, you will be upon your own resources."

"As whom does the Falcon know me?" he inserted.

"I am coming to that. He knows you as Tavernake, the jeweler—a childhood friend of mine. The work he expects you to do is to oversee the cutting and resetting of the jewels—a work that you will never do. He will no doubt see you before I do, so guard your tongue. Trust no one unless he comes in my name and has proof."

"Then I shall see you there?"

A nod. "I start to-night, as I must reach Shingtselunpo in advance of you. Oh, as I said, I come and go as the wind, when and where I will, and depending upon no man! But I do not go as Sarojini Nanjee. . . . . Just before you reach Tali-fang—it will not be necessary until then—Masein, your Lisu guide, will help you effect a transformation from a white man to a Hindu merchant from Mandalay. White skins are not popular in that region. You speak Hindustani as well as some Hindus, better than others. Avoid the natives as much as possible, for they are not over-fond of any one who is not of their race. If asked whither you go, say to a holy city in Tibet."

Silence settled for a moment after that. They were more than a mile from Myitkyina, and the silver coins still glittered and danced in midstream.

"D 'you think," he began at length, "if the Government knew I was going into Tibet, it would approve?"

She shrugged. "Why not? It was understood at Delhi that you were to do as I directed; go wherever I willed."

"Suppose—" But he halted.

"Yes?"

"Suppose I am killed in Tibet?"

"But you will not be."

"You said there would be dangers."

"Yes—but you are a resourceful man."

"Frequently resourceful men are killed. Let us suppose I were murdered in Tibet—by robbers, we 'll say. It would place my Government in an awkward position. Could Tibet explain satisfactorily; or would there be a British expedition, resulting in death for hundreds, because of one indiscreet Englishman?"

"Is it indiscreet," she countered, "to recover the jewels?"

He appeared to be considering that. Finally:

"If it were made known that the gems are there, the Government could demand action from the ruling powers of Tibet—or send an expedition."

She laughed. "Do you call that logic? And answer me, impossible one, who *are* the 'ruling powers' of Tibet, as you choose to call them? The Dalai Lama? Or the British Raj? Answer me that! And as for the expedition: *we* are the expedition. In this case the wits of two are worth more than a hundred Lee-Metfords. Guile! Guile is the stronger weapon—and it does not attract so much attention as guns!"

Again silence. They were still drifting with the cur-

rent. Behind, in the moon's path, was a tiny blotch—another boat. He watched it curiously. Seeing his inquisitive look, the woman spoke.

"No doubt it is Tambusami with your luggage; I instructed him to fetch it from the Inspection Bungalow and follow. Yonder," she explained, with a gesture downstream, "is your camp. There you will remain until dawn. I shall accompany you to the camp, as I have further instructions to give your guide."

Questions bred in Trent's brain and clamored for utterance, but he pressed them back. For her to know he was anxious was the surest way to learn nothing. Therefore he held his tongue, reflecting upon what she had told him.

He was suspicious of her promises. She was not a type to volunteer service to a government without some personal motive. And of her motives he was doubtful. There was a scheme of her own interrelated and under the surface. Too, he felt that by this latest move, in having his luggage brought from the Inspection Bungalow, she had thrown Kerth off the trail.

He extracted cigarettes from his pocket, for he felt that a smoke would clarify his thoughts; passed the case to her. She took one with languorous grace and bent nearer for him to light it. As the match flared, he saw her eyes, again like black opals, close to his. But he learned no secrets from them; they were as baffling, as crowded with mysteries, as the black jungles ahead of him.

"There is much more to be explained," she said,

tilting her head and expelling smoke from her nostrils; "certain things to be ignorant of which would surely lead to trouble. . . ."

As they drifted on she talked, cigarette in one hand, the other resting upon the map. Before long Da-yak plied his paddle, sending little ripples over the stars that lay reflected like silver pebbles in the river. The moon rode high above the hills, a phantom dugout, and the collar of silver coins spread in extravagant display. The boatman in the rear crooned a song of ancient Hkamti—of a Sawbwa who loved a Maru maiden and forsook his kingdom for the dark-eyed daughter of delight. And Trent, listening, felt himself drawn back to the night when he stood in the bow of the *Manchester*, in the realm of the stars, and Romance whispered an old, old tale.

The spell did not leave until the boat grated upon a sandbank, close to a dark tangle of forest, and Da-yak sprang out. Then Sarojini Nanjee put away the map, rose and took Trent's hand.

"Your camp is only a short distance beyond the trees," she told him.

As he stepped out of the boat Da-yak made a sound like a night-bird, and a moment later there came an answering cry from the dark thicket.

4

When the juggler—he of the scar and the drooping eyelid—left the alley in the bazaar, it was to follow Da-yak. At the P. W. D. Bungalow he saw a sahib join

the Tibetan—which was what he expected. From there he tracked them to the river, and stood upon the high bank watching as they cast off and glided downstream.

When they were well under way he sauntered down to the huddle of boats, and, choosing one, dropped his pack in the bow and kicked the Kachin who lay sleeping in the bottom.

"Wake up, lazy one; I would go to Waingmaw."

The boatman, thus awakened, looked up with unconcealed hostility. Seeing a native, and a ragged one at that, he let go a stream of oaths that, fortunately for him, were not understood by the juggler. However, the latter imagined from the tone in which the words were delivered that he was being neither praised nor glorified.

"This for thy trouble, O boatman," said the juggler, choosing to ignore the oaths and thrusting a banknote within view of the Kachin's eyes.

The boatman, not entirely appeased yet too avaricious to allow a mere insult to stand between him and the banknote, pushed off, and the juggler seated himself in the stern, both to steer and to watch the craft ahead.

"Do not gain on yonder boat," he instructed when they were in midstream, "nor lose. If thou hast a conscience that thou canst smother, then this night will indeed be profitable for thee, Kachin."

The juggler said this knowing well that his every word would be repeated to all the boatmen in Myitkyina, and that, after traveling through devious channels, they

would reach the bazaar, greatly magnified en route. For what purpose a juggler with a drooping eyelid had followed a boat down the river could only be surmised —but bazaars surmise much.

"Know you those who are in that boat?" he continued, baiting gossip.

The Kachin grunted—which was intended as a negative answer.

"The boatmen are no friends of thine?"

Another grunt. "The boat belongs to Kin Lo," the Kachin volunteered, chewing on an opium pellet. "But some stranger hired it for the night." And he added, by way of personal suggestion, "They paid well."

This information pleased the juggler, for he smiled and drew out a cheroot and lighted it.

"Aye!" he growled. "They paid well, did they? Well, why should they not? Robbers! Sons of swine! Listen, Kachin—in yonder boat is my enemy. From Mandalay I have followed him, and ere the moon sinks I shall avenge the wrongs he committed against my house!"

"A-a-ah!" sympathized the Kachin, forgetting the rude awakening—they are as eager for scandal, these wild men of the hills, as the most polished Englishman who sits beneath a punkah in Rangoon Cantonment.

Whereupon the juggler recited a tale of imaginary woes and wrongs that did justice to his alleged art of story-telling. Myitkyina's lights had long dropped away behind when the juggler saw the leading boat turn, cross the path of moonlight and glide shoreward.

"Ah!" he muttered. "See, Kachin, he thinks to elude me, the swine!"

A glance behind showed him another craft—a mere speck on the expanse of the river. For a moment he was undecided what to do, then, with an exclamation of satisfaction, he stripped himself but for a perineal band.

"Listen well, Kachin," he admonished, creeping forward. "It is not wise for my enemy to see me coming ashore; therefore I shall swim, like a crocodile. Turn back to Myitkyina. There hurry to the bungalow of Colonel Warburton Sahib—you know where it is? Tell him he is wanted at the landing immediately. He will go."

"But my money," objected the Kachin. "How do I know you will come back?"

"Dost thou not see, O fool, that I have left my clothes and my pack? Will not I return for them?"

The boatman was not positive of that.

"Well, then, I will give you half now," compromised the juggler, taking a wallet from the inside pocket of his discarded jacket. The Kachin watched with crafty eyes to see if the wallet would be returned to the pocket, but the juggler thrust it carefully under his turban.

"Lend me thy *dah*," he directed. "And do as I said. Thou shalt be well rewarded for thy trouble."

With the knife gripped between his teeth, he slipped over the side into the current. He made no sound as he swam away from the boat; only his moving head and the ripples in his wake told of swift, underwater strokes.

The river was cool—old wine to the muscles—and he made for the bank several hundred feet above the white stretch of sand where the other craft had landed. Not until he was very close to the shore could he touch bottom. There he halted, head above the surface, eyes straining to penetrate the gloom further along. He could make out the faint blur of the boat and a single figure huddled in the stern. A look toward midstream showed him his craft fast being absorbed by the darkness. Behind it, coming from Myitkyina, was another boat.

He waited for events to mature. When the latter craft, which he could see contained two forms, came abreast of him, midstream, it turned shoreward and a few minutes later touched the sandbank near the boat that he had followed. He could dimly make out the two forms as they carried several bulky objects ashore and vanished in the jungle—leaving the solitary figure huddled in the rear of one of the boats.

The juggler smiled to himself and struck out, swimming easily with the current. Less than twenty yards from the boat he submerged, propelling himself forward until yellow sparks reeled before him; then he buoyed himself up.

The two country-boats loomed close by. His heart beat a tattoo against his breast as he waited, feet upon the pebbly bottom, to see if his approach had been heard. Apparently it had not, for the man—a native boatman from his appearance—lounged in the rear seat, his body slouched forward.

After a brief hesitation the juggler (his eyelid no longer drooping) took the *dah* from between his teeth and moved slowly, cautiously to the rear of the boat. It was shallower there; the water barely reached his arm-pits and his chin was level with the back of the craft. The man had not stirred; he was evidently asleep, the juggler thought. The forest that met the sandbank was silent but for the whirr of cicadas.

For a full moment the juggler stood motionless. When he moved it was quickly—and before the native had time to realize what had occurred, he was seized and jerked backward over the stern. If he cried out, the water smothered the sound. But what he failed to do in noise, he made up for in activity. He squirmed and wriggled, his legs and arms thrashing about in vain effort to wrest himself from the grasp of his sudden assailant. But the juggler had the advantage of surprise—and a firm hold on the native's neck—and he brought the hilt of the *dah* down upon the latter's skull. The native relaxed—sank with a gurgle. . . . . The juggler lifted him. Assured that he was only unconscious, he dragged him to the sandbank, and there, breathing heavily, sank on his knees.

The native, like the juggler, had a beardless face and was naked but for loincloth and turban. The latter was small, a mere rag twisted around his head. Therefore, the juggler told himself, with the darkness as his ally he might easily pass as the other—for a short while at least. And the defeat of empire has been accomplished in less than an hour.

He quickly stripped the man, then cut his own turban into strips and gagged and bound the unconscious one. When this was done, he caught the fellow under the arms and dragged him several yards down the bank. There, carefully selecting a spot in the undergrowth where he was not likely to be soon found, he hid him. Retracing his steps to the boat, he sat down in the stern to wait.

Indeed, he reflected, his kismet looked upon him with favor.

CHAPTER IX

FEVER

LIKE a black wedge driven from Hkamti Long into Upper Burma, its point touching the confluence of the Irrawaddi, lies a strip of territory that on British maps is marked "unadministered." Outposts have been established on either side, from Fort Hertz down to Myitkyina, paltry stations where, in many instances, one white man and less than a company of Gurkhas impose law upon primitive tribes. Thus, walled by civilization yet untouched by it, the people of this black wedge live. A peaceful lot now, this remnant of the once great Tai race. Copper-skinned men hunt through its cathedral forests with *dah* and crossbow. Baboons, buffalo and musk deer roam over its hills. Reptiles haunt the green mucous of miasmatic valleys. Fever and pestilence lurk in the purple fungi spawned by dark jungles, in bogs and in swamps where the stench of rotten orchids hangs like a poison-vapor.

Into this black wedge Trent traveled. Late afternoon of the ninth day found his caravan encamped on a spit of sand reaching out into a river, a stream that moved languorously between high canebrake. The man who sat on a collapsible campstool before his tent, smoking, was as little like the Englishman who got off the train at Myitkyina ten days before as possible. His

khaki breeches and flannel shirt were streaked with dust; mud was caked upon his boots. The sun had burned him a deeper bronze, and every variety of insect, from sandfly to blood-sucker, had left marks upon him. A nine-days' growth of beard helped to cover tawny fever-stains, but blotches showed on his neck and hands. . . . . The jungle had shown him how she initiates her neophytes.

As he sat there staring at the jade-green river, he went back, in retrospection, over the journey—not that he derived any pleasure from the recollections, but because his brain seemed inclined to reach behind and he was too mentally weary to make any effort to prevent it. To him, now, those nine days were a confused sequence. For many miles beyond the 'Nmai-hka travel was not difficult, along bridle-paths and past villages where Kachin and Maru women, flat-featured, ugly creatures, planted their *taungya,* and men sat outside fiber huts and chewed betel leaves; rugged, undulating country; rivers that flung their torrents over shallow beds and were spanned by rattan bridges, the latter impossible for the mules. Twice, where the water was too deep, Trent had the muleteers construct crude rafts and pole the pack-animals across. The first time they attempted this they lost a mule. Trent would always remember that scene: the shrieking porters on the raft, the look of the beast as the stream wrapped foaming arms about it and dragged it down among sharp-fanged rocks.

That night he had had his first attack of fever. For

several hours he lay on his camp-bed, harassed by ticks and bloodflies, shivering and vomiting at intervals. Then he fell asleep, and when he awakened in the morning, with rain drip-dripping monotonously upon tapering fronds, his back ached and he was a furnace. All day it rained and all day Masein, the Lisu guide, attended him. The following morning he had only a slight temperature—a chronic touch of fever that remained for several days—and he pressed on.

Hourly the country grew wilder. They passed through thickets and underbrush as tall as a man. Wild pigs scurried away in the bracken, and jungle fowl preened their wings in the shadow of groping plants, taking flight at the appearance of human beings. The fourth night they were close to a stretch of burning bamboo—one of those sourceless fires that spring up and sweep over miles. It was an awesome sight, the flames flaring crimson against the sky, like the angry vomit of a crater, the bamboo stalks popping and crackling as loud as the rattle of machine-guns.

Soon their trail led into great, dim forests. There the sunlight, robbed of its pitiless blaze, sifted through interlaced branches and sucked up moisture from the ground, creating a weird green haze. The air was malarial, the ground ever soggy and in places treacherous. More than once the mules sank to their bellies in bogs and fens. The miasmas crawled with stealthy life —snakes and horrid land-crabs. Leeches bred by the millions, and the oozy corruption exuded a thin, luminous vapor that was warm and clammy and reeked of

decayed matter. This noxious swamp-effluvia seemed to penetrate to every crevice of Trent's being; it saturated his brain; it tainted his thoughts. He ceased to marvel at the wilderness of plumed flowers, of dank jungle caverns where sunlight pulsed through the lacework of leaves in needles of white flame—stretches where convolvulus fought for possession of every limb and trunk, and insects rattled above stagnant pools of Death. . . . There were times when a fever-film separated him from the world about him and deprived objects of their individuality.

At night spunk shone like phantom eyes. Strange winged creatures wheeled out of the darkness. Baboons coughed in the bush. When the moon came out the swamps glittered like sheets of rusted gunmetal—or, if it stormed, the great jungle-expanse seemed a chapel of terror. Often Trent tried to read by the campfire. But invariably the print danced before his eyes. He would lie down outside the tent, listening to the Maru porters piping on bamboo flutes, and when he grew sleepy Masein would rub him with alcohol. . . . . Thus he spent his evenings.

Frequently—at dusk, dawn or midday—cool hands of memory fell with silken lightness upon his feverish thoughts, the hands of the girl who had become so closely woven into the fabric of his being. During those half-delirious hours she grew to be an integral possession, a real presence, warm and tangible. . . . And just as frequently, perhaps more poignantly, he thought of Manlove. The silence, the isolation from his kind,

seemed to press deeper the realization of what had occurred. There were moments when it seemed unreal; when the woman of the cobra-bracelet, Chatterjee and the others that played in the drama, were vague shapes in a shadow-show. . . . . Or, if it had all happened, it was long ago, dim as a dream. . . . . That was fever.

Too, he thought of Euan Kerth and conjectured what had become of him since that evening he hurried away in the dusk at Myitkyina. That he had lost the trail he felt certain, although there was a chance that he would appear unexpectedly, as he had done before—a very filmy chance. Had he discovered where Trent was going, he would surely have communicated with him in some way.

At several villages he inquired through Masein if another caravan had preceded his. By the negative replies it became evident that Sarojini Nanjee had taken another route, and he strongly suspected that she had deliberately sent him on the longer and more difficult of the two. After a few attempts to draw information from Masein, he decided that the Lisu knew nothing, was simply what he was represented to be—a guide.

The country beyond the swampland afforded much better traveling. To the west mountains were visible —faint pastels of gray and pearl and amethyst. In rocky gashes in the earth little cataracts fumed and tumbled, and ferns and orchids grew in damp, moss-covered hollows. Trent shot a deer and several pheasants. The higher altitude buoyed his spirits, as did the fresh venison and fowl after so much canned food. He

ceased thinking morose thoughts. Yet the horror and reek of those two days in the miasmas still clung in his memory, even in his nostrils, he sometimes imagined.

Thus, on the afternoon of the ninth day, they came to the spit of sand reaching out into the river and pitched camp; and Trent, pipe in mouth, sat in front of his shelter and looked at the Maru porters swimming in the jade-green river without seeing them, while Masein gathered fuel, and the mules, tethered near to the canebrake, swung their heads and stamped in futile efforts to shake off leeches. There was nothing in the scene even to suggest that an eventful night was being ushered in.

The sun dropped lower. It chased the jade-green river with gold until it glittered like a scaly python. Fireflies glimmered in the rushes, and a bat pursued a velvety-winged moth. . . . . Across the stream, from a Shan village somewhere close by, a gong sounded. The Marus, laughing, swam across and disappeared in the high grass. Masein called after them, but received no response, and, muttering to himself, he impaled a strip of venison upon a stick and held it over the flame. It writhed. . . . .

A few minutes later Trent was stripped and in the water. Refreshed by a swim, he dried himself and ate a meal of venison steak and tea. Stars sprinkled the still flushed sky, like drippings from a silver paintbrush, and under the spell of the jungle sunset Trent sat down in front of his tent to smoke.

It was then that he heard a faint, staccato report—like that of a revolver or a rifle.

It came from the hill-jungle behind the camp, and for several seconds afterward he listened for a repetition. Masein, too, had heard, for he stood motionless, looking at his master. But there was no second report, and the silence, the utter quiet, made Trent wonder if he had really heard anything. If it was a shot—? Well, he knew the natives had no firearms; there must be white men in the district, P. W. D. men or Government officers. In that event he did not wish to be seen, as there would be questions to answer. He therefore suggested that Masein investigate, and the Lisu plunged eagerly into the canebrake.

A moment afterward Trent's imagination supplied a solution for the shot—Kerth. He started to call Masein back, but reconsidered and waited. . . . His wrist-watch ticked off fifteen minutes. He noticed, abstractedly, pale flickerings on the far-away hills. When a half hour had passed he followed the native's trail through the rushes and along a narrow bridle-path. Not far from camp he met Masein.

"It is a white man, master," exclaimed the Lisu. "He has a camp there"—with a gesture.

Then he extended something that glinted softly in the gloom, and Trent took it and examined it closely. The blood throbbed in his throat.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"He gave it to me, master—the white man. He said when you saw that you would come."

Without another word Trent followed the Lisu, the blood still throbbing hotly in his throat. For the thing that glinted softly was a golden bracelet with the figure of a king-cobra wrought in heavy relief upon it.

More than a half-mile from the camp, on the trail that Trent's caravan had traveled, they came to a clearing. A tent was pitched at one side, a litter of packs scattered carelessly about three mules. A shadowy form sat on a stool before the tent-door—a form that resolved into a young man in khaki and a sun-helmet. The revolver that he held shone in the deep twilight.

As Trent and the Lisu appeared he jumped up. Trent instinctively drew his weapon. The young man stumbled toward him. A yard away he paused and swayed; his revolver slipped from limp fingers.

"Major Trent!"

At the sound of the voice, Trent sprang forward and caught the slim form. It relaxed and the sun-helmet fell to the ground, releasing a wealth of hair that rippled down and showered the shoulders with coiled strands that in the fading light gleamed like molten copper.

"Oh, I knew you would come!" she gasped, with a hysterical little laugh. "I—I sent that—like Kurnavati sent her bracelet—to Humayun—only —you came —in time!"

Whereupon her head dropped back and the starlight shone upon cool, lustrous features. But she was not cool. Trent felt the heat of her body, and, apprehensive, he placed his hand upon her forehead; let it slip down until it touched the pulse in her throat; drew a

sharp breath and swore. Her eyes were open—glassy, staring eyes that looked at him without seeing.

"Miss Charteris!" he said. "Where are your porters? Who 's with you? You 're not here alone, are you?"

She did not answer. The lids sank over her eyes, and he knew she had fainted. He looked about irresolutely. Through the trees, in the direction of his camp, he saw a quick flash.

"There was nobody else here when you first came?" he asked Masein; then, as the Lisu answered negatively, commanded: "Look in the tent."

Masein obeyed. His expression when he emerged told Trent it was empty. The Englishman lifted the girl in his arms.

"Wait here a few minutes," he instructed. "If anybody comes, report it to me."

With that he turned and strode back along the bridle-path, laboring under the weight of the girl's body.

Frequent flashes illuminated earth and sky; thunder grumbled, approaching closer with every roll. A wind had sprung up and was rustling the leaves overhead. Trent hurried, fearing the storm would break before he reached camp.

When he finally came to the sand-spit the wind was wildly whipping the tent-flap. The stars had gone, and lightning, streaks following in rapid succession, reflected a livid, sick hue upon the river. The girl was conscious when he placed her upon his cot. She clung to his hands.

"Where is the pain?" he asked. "In your back mainly?"

She only moaned; he felt a tremor pass through her. Gently freeing his hands, he went outside and shouted for one of the Marus. He swore savagely when he received no answer. After strengthening the tent-pegs, he made a search for his electric pocket-lamp. Snapping it on, he opened his medicine-case; took out a hypodermic syringe. . . . .

The rain came then, suddenly, in a drenching downpour. Sheets of water, illuminated by vivid flares, swept across the river; ruthlessly lashed the canebrake; beat deafeningly upon the canvas. Thunder crashed out in mighty belches that shook the very ground . . . It seemed that the artilleries of the universe had concentrated upon earth.

Trent knelt beside Dana Charteris, holding her hands and frequently feeling her pulse. The girl went from one paroxysm of shivering into another. Gradually the opiate deadened the pain. Several times she tried to speak to him, but he put his fingers over her lips.

Meanwhile the tent-ropes strained, the wind tore through the trees. An occasional crash told of a falling limb. For over an hour this continued; then it ceased as suddenly as it had begun. When the wind died down, Trent lighted a candle. Dana Charteris was as still and white as a chiseled figure on a tomb. The sight of her made him catch his breath. As he drew nearer she opened her eyes. He lifted one burning wrist.

"My porters," she whispered. "They ran away—I—"

"You must keep very quiet," he interposed.

"Is—is it—that bad?"

He hesitated, then nodded. She closed her eyes; opened them an instant later.

"But do you want to save me? You know now . . . . the bracelet . . . . ."

"You must keep quiet," he repeated. "You must help me that way."

A short while afterward, when the pattering rain had ceased and stars peeped through the doorway, Masein crept in and told Trent something. What it was the Englishman could not remember; he remembered only that he directed the Lisu to break up the girl's camp and bring her mules and supplies to the sand-spit. Every thought was focussed upon the slim hot body that rolled and tossed upon the cot. She begged for injections of opiate and sobbed when he refused. His lip was sore from the pressure of his teeth. With each shiver of pain he suffered. It was one of the few times in his career when he was afraid, dreadfully afraid.

The dark hours wore on. Shortly after first-dawn she fell into a restless feverish sleep. He slipped out to tell Masein to fetch fresh water, and as he reëntered he felt a hard object in his pocket, pressing against his thigh. It was the bracelet. He withdrew it, vanquishing by sheer force the thoughts that uprose in his mind, and placed it in his kit-bag. There it would stay until she could speak.

As morning looked down from a golden sky Dana Charteris awakened, and the battle was on again.

2

During the next two days Trent lost cognizance of time. He warred against elemental forces, armed with the crudest of weapons. Queer, unfolding moments came to him, bringing a potent consciousness of conflict that took him back to nights of tragedy and smoky turmoil—a sense of blood in throat and nostrils that soldiers know.

The girl wavered on the border of delirium. In her weakness she pleaded for false stimulation, and there were times when he was tempted, for her sake, to take the easiest course. Yet he knew that to surrender would slay the tissues of resistance that he had struggled so steadfastly to build, and he forced himself to consider only a lasting relief, suffering himself an anguish as keen as the physical and experiencing self-loathing when he performed those intimacies that were demanded of him.

He had fought death where the harvest was ghastly, perhaps had grown a little calloused, as men will when in close and constant contact with human ills, yet always, even in the case of the meanest Hindu coolie, he felt a responsibility that challenged his sparring instincts. It was as though he guarded some terrible frontier. . . . But nothing had ever so drawn upon him and consumed his every unit of nerve and energy as this. He felt wholly accountable for her condition,

here in this remote spot. Her pain was his own, a part of him, feeding upon his vitality. He gave willingly, seeming in moments when she was drawn close to the Door to infuse into her the power to fight as he, a strong man, could fight—physically and spiritually. He was lifting her, but sinking himself as he lifted. There were periods when thought and action were no longer submissive to will; his brain felt atrophied and he was sentient only to utter exhaustion. He seemed incapable of stemming the rush of things beyond his dominion—was an atom in the path of a blinding and inexorable force. The values of human remedies and sciences dwindled in his sight. He was drained. Yet a vitalizing power, some inner dynamo, never failed to energize him. He attended to every detail himself, allowing Masein and the Marus only to take turns with a palm-leaf at the bedside. . . . . It was, after he had exhausted medical means, a grapple in the dark with foes that were neither tangible nor corporeal; when it was over he did not understand nor try to fathom the miracle that was wrought.

At dusk of the third day her temperature was almost normal and she was sleeping quietly. Trent, his face haggard, left the Lisu fanning her and lurched rather than walked to the river. He shed his clothing and lay for some time in the shallow water, his head pillowed upon one bent arm, tasting of absolute relaxation.

When he returned to the tent Dana Charteris was awake. Her hair lay in red-gold confusion about her white face—a pool of glowing shades and lights. She

smiled faintly as he entered and he took the palmleaf from Masein, motioning him to leave. She spoke.

"I think we 've won."

By that he knew they had. A surge of relief swept up through him. It was like a new and strange delirium; it unseated his control. He sank upon his knees, and his lips touched one cool, moist hand. The fingers of her other hand ran lightly through his hair.

"O Arnold Trent, how you fought!" she breathed tremulously. "And all the while you were wondering, wondering why I was there that night—why I—"

"Hush," he remonstrated, lifting his head, again in command of himself. "It is n't finished yet. You must promise not to speak of that—not until I ask you. Now go to sleep. That is the quickest way you can get well."

"I promise," she said weakly, tears trembling in her eyes, "if you will rest, too. Will you? You need to be strong—strong—so you can help me."

She closed her eyes; sighed. Her hand slipped from his clasp.

He spread a blanket on the sand in front of the tent; spread it, and lay down; and almost instantly sleep declared itself the emperor of his being.

3

The convalescence of Dana Charteris was short. A break in the rains had more than a little to do with her recovery, for the sunshine was a golden elixir that aroused the stricken forces of her body, was a warmth

that wiped away the fever-stains and ripened a faint color in her cheeks.

Once Trent offered to read to her. She begged him instead to tell her of those tiger-hunts with his father. That seemed to touch a spring that opened secret vaults of his nature. There was color and feeling in his telling. He spoke in the abstract. She could smell the beast, flanks aquiver, and wet, monsoon jungles in his sentences—sentences that abounded with the metaphors that he liked to use. . . . . India lived in her while he talked—India, her wildernesses and her cities, her heartbreak and her treachery. Too, he taught her a few Hindustani words and phrases.

But his contributions did not alone make those hours rare. Her gifts were as precious as pearls. Gossamer dawns when the sun's sabers smote the lingering darkness and sent it reeling, when life seemed at its ripest; the languor of purple nights, campfires glowing in the dusk—all these were but vessels for the exquisite revelation of her.

Yet under their talk was a strain that never relaxed. In the main part, they spoke guardedly. The man never ceased to wonder what the consequences of the delay would be, and it concerned him more than a little what Sarojini Nanjee might do if she learned through Masein of an alien presence in the caravan; while the girl, realizing she was holding him back, yet dreading the time when he pronounced her entirely recovered, was in a constant state of chaos.

The fourth day after she passed the danger mark brought to a climax their play-acting. The sun, like a red-lacquered ball, was rolling toward the hills, shying little bronze disks at the river, and Dana Charteris was seated on a blanket in front of the tent. Trent went to his kit-bag to get a fresh supply of tobacco, and the gold bracelet slipped out. She smiled—a frightened smile. She broke the tension by saying:

"There 's no use to pretend any longer. I can't endure it. I 'm delaying you. I am strong enough to —to—" She stopped; began anew. "Oh, you 've been fighting against it! You 're afraid for me to speak, afraid—" Again she halted, groping for words.

He had picked up the bracelet. She caught his hand.

"Sit down, won't you?"

He sank beside her. But his eyes were upon the heavily-chased circlet of gold.

"You 've been so kind!" she breathed. "And all along, when you realized I had been deceiving you, you tried to tell yourself it was n't true; that there might be two bracelets like that, and that it was n't I who wore it at Gaya that night. But there's probably not another bracelet like that in India. My brother bought it for me in Delhi. It *was* I who wore it at Gaya—who spoke to you on the road—who eavesdropped—who tried to cheat you—who ran away, like a coward, when it became known that Captain Manlove had been —been killed!"

Strained silence followed, the girl eagerly watching his face for some expression either of encouragement

or condemnation, the man staring at the bracelet in his hands. She forced herself to go on.

"There's so much to tell that . . . . Well, I'll start at the very beginning, when my brother sent for me to come to India—"

Followed a recital of the meeting in Delhi and of her brother's story of the jewels of Indore.

"That night some one entered Alan's room and stole the imitation Pearl Scarf," she continued. "Alan was hurt—stabbed. Later I found the thief's turban and, inside, a scrap of paper with foreign writing upon it. When I showed it to Alan, he said it was Urdu. Translated, it read something like this: 'His name is Major Arnold Trent, of Gaya.'"

Trent lifted his eyes questioningly, and she nodded.

"Yes, your name and address. That was all. . . . Alan was of the opinion that the package Chavigny carried into the bazaar at Indore contained the *real* Pearl Scarf, and that instead of the copy he snatched that. By some means, he believed, it was traced to him—and stolen—whether by Chavigny or another he could only guess.

"I had an inspiration." She smiled slightly. "You will think me foolish—yet—yet you seemed to understand on the *Manchester* when I told you of the 'Caves of Kor' and the pirate island. I saw the doors of my adventure opening. Too, I wanted to help Alan. I suggested that I might learn something if I went to Gaya; Alan could n't because of his hurt. He would n't hear of it at first, but I finally persuaded him—and

went to Gaya, intending to go no further, not realizing—''

She broke off abruptly, shrugged.

''The afternoon I reached Gaya I hunted up your bungalow, merely to get the location. That was the time I met you on the road. I 'm a poor adventurer, for that encounter frightened me dreadfully—and by the way you looked at that''—indicating the bracelet—''I knew you 'd recognize it if you saw it again. That night I returned—and—'' She paused, quite evidently confused. ''You 'll surely think I—I—''

''Go on,'' he said laconically.

She averted her face, a flush upon her cheeks.

''I listened outside a window and heard you tell Captain Manlove of your orders from Delhi and that you were going to Benares. After that I hurried away. As I was leaving the compound Captain Manlove came to the door. I went back to the Dâk Bungalow and sat down and thought. Oh, I thought a long while. Then I rode to the telegraph office and sent a message to Alan, saying I was leaving for Benares. While I was there an officer came in and I heard him tell the clerk that Captain Manlove had been found''—she hesitated—''dead.''

The muscles of Trent's jaw tightened visibly as she pronounced the word. Otherwise he was expressionless, still staring at the bracelet. Why did n't he move or say something, she wondered? It was maddening, the way he kept silence!

''The picture of Captain Manlove,'' she resumed, ''as

I last saw him in the doorway haunted me. I thought of a hundred things that might happen if it were learned that I had gone to your bungalow just before—before his death. So''—there was a bitter note in her voice—''so I left within two hours, buying a ticket to Mughal Sarai instead of to Benares.''

For the first time he asked a question; but he did not raise his eyes.

''You took the coral pendant from my room—there at Benares?''

She nodded. ''That piece of coral! It caused me hours of anxiety! The afternoon you arrived I saw it in your hands while you were sitting on the portico. It rather fired my imagination, although I did n't know its significance then. After dinner, when you left the hotel, I tried to follow, but I became hopelessly lost. I had a frightful time finding my way back to the hotel. But I was n't to be cheated; intrigue was burning in me that night. I borrowed a skeleton key and sent my servant—a man I had hired—to search your room and bring me the piece of coral. Of course, when I found that it opened and that Chavigny's alias was engraved inside, I knew I had a valuable clue. But my servant was n't able to return it, for when he went back there was a light in your room. . . . . I was in a dilemma. I did n't know what to do.''

''But why did you send him to my room in the first place—or follow me to Benares?'' he interrupted quietly. ''Surely you knew I was on a Government mission and that—I sha'n't mince words—that you

were interfering with affairs that did n't concern you.''

''Yes, I realize that,'' she confessed. ''Oh, I admit I was wrong—but I had entered the 'Caves of Kor' and the lure of them drew me on.''

''I don't mean to be unkind,'' he broke in, relenting. ''I—''

''You are simply telling the truth,'' she supplied. ''I *should n't* have done it, but I deluded myself into believing I might recover the Pearl Scarf and help Alan. I was selfish enough to want him to achieve at the cost of another's failure. That was why I went on to Calcutta. I had no idea where you were going, that next morning at Benares; that is, until I saw a porter take your trunk from your room. Then I sent my servant to find out where it was bound, and—I packed quickly and followed.''

''Then you tracked me to the Chinese quarter there, instead of—'' He did not finish.

She knew that the truth would tarnish a memory, but she could not evade it. She smiled wanly.

''I have reached the 'Temple of Truth' in my 'Caves of Kor'! Yes, I followed, with a guide. Alan had wired me the name of a man who he said would serve me well—an old bearer of his. I waited all afternoon on the upper porch of the hotel, and when you left I followed, with Guru Singh, the bearer. We hired an automobile, instructing the driver to keep you in sight. When you left your automobile, we left ours. . . . . Oh, those frightful places you led us through! Of

course we were halted when you went into that house in that dreadful street.

"I determined then to make your acquaintance. Just before you came out I sent Guru Singh away; then I deliberately threw myself upon your mercy. But oh, I felt guilty! I realized that you didn't suspect it was all deliberate and planned!

"The next morning I made another desperate move. I *had* to return that piece of coral. Too, I wanted to learn your plans. I gave the pendant to Guru Singh —with instructions. To insure him against discovery, I—I asked you to go shopping with me. Guru Singh found a packet in your trunk showing that you had a berth on the *Manchester* to Rangoon, and that from there you were going to Myitkyina, to the shop of Dayak, a Tibetan. But your servant happened along, and in the excitement Guru Singh forgot to leave the coral. It seemed that I'd never rid myself of it!"

The sun was almost below the hills now. A gong in the nearby Shan village rang clearly across the quiet evening. Both Trent and the girl sat motionless, listening until it died out.

"I wired Alan that I was going to Rangoon and would wait for him there," she said, taking up the thread of her story. "I didn't send it until just before I went to the boat, for I was afraid he might say no—and, oh, I wanted to see my adventure through!

"On shipboard Guru Singh at last succeeded in returning the coral—but that inevitable servant of yours

appeared. I was terrified when I learned that Guru Singh had been caught! I felt responsible for it, and afterward I carried food to him several times. That was what I was doing the night I met you on deck. I was frightened, and I flung plate and all overboard. Then . . . . But you know what occurred then. I had come to hate myself for what I was doing, yet the thing was a Medusa. It held me and I let it draw me on.

"I met Guru Singh, by previous instructions, at the pagoda in Rangoon, and we drove to Alan's bungalow —but only to leave part of my baggage, and that night I took a train for Myitkyina with Guru Singh. When we got there I realized the presence of a strange white woman would be noticed in so small a place, so I instructed Guru Singh carefully and went back to Mandalay to wait.

"The second day in Mandalay I heard from Guru Singh. He wired for me to come. When I arrived he told me he had found where the jewels were—also that you had left Myitkyina. It seems that Da-yak was arrested"—here the muscles of Trent's jaw tensed again —"and your servant, too. Guru Singh said he bribed the jailer to let him see Da-yak, who, after he was paid liberally, told where you had gone. . . . He said the jewels had been taken to a city in Tibet: the name is Shingtse-lunpo. The sum of his words is that this place is the penetralia of a band called the Order of the Falcon, with a man known as the Falcon at its head. The Tibetan took oath he did n't know the Falcon. At any rate, he said that to get there one had

to go first to a town across the China border—Tali-fang, he called it—and that only three men in Myitkyina knew the route to Tali-fang, one of whom had gone with your caravan and another with some one else. The third was a Buddhist priest. Da-yak said there were several ways of reaching Tali-fang and that you had been sent by the longest. At Tali-fang one would have to depend upon his own resources to get a guide to take him into Tibet, he said. That was all he would tell—or rather, he said that was all he knew."

"I don't suppose," Trent questioned, "he told who had him arrested?" Yet Trent felt that he knew without asking who had arrested Da-yak and Tambusami.

"No," she replied.

Trent nodded—more to himself than to her—and she went on.

"That the jewels were in Tibet—vast, mysterious Tibet—both frightened and fascinated me. To go where no white woman had been—the land of Marco Polo, Orazio della Penna and Huc! You can understand the lure of it. Yet I think I must have been a little mad to have attempted it—but we all are, aren't we?

"Guru Singh—poor, dear Guru Singh!—tried to persuade me to turn back, but I wouldn't. We went to the Buddhist priest. For an extortionate sum he agreed to guide us to Tali-fang. So we outfitted a caravan, Guru Singh, the monk and I, and two days after you left Myitkyina we took the same trail. I went as a man; I thought it would excite less suspicion. Before leaving, I wrote Alan. I waited

until then because I knew he would disapprove.

"At several villages we learned that you had already passed; then, the third afternoon, one of the porters, who was ahead, came back with the news that your pack-train was about a mile in advance. We marched more slowly after that. The nearness of another white person reassured me, for—oh, before that it was terrible in those jungles and swamps! I think the loneliness and the fright, after dark, would have driven me mad had I not remembered what the converted Brahmin priest, who lectured at home, said about the jungle. That comforted me.

"Last— When was it? I can't remember now—but it was late afternoon and I was sitting in front of my tent. The Buddhist priest passed. There was something about him, the way he looked at that moment, that struck me numb to the heart. . . . . I realized what an impossible thing I was trying to do; wondered what would happen if I reached Tali-fang and found I could n't go further. Yet—yet I *could n't* turn back. As I sat there, thinking, a desperate plan unfolded. . . . . I told Guru Singh.

"The next afternoon, late, he and the priest and my porters left for Myitkyina. Guru Singh stayed behind until—until I fired the shot—and—and your muleteer brought you. I began to feel ill, suddenly. I . . . Well, that 's all. I had intended to tell you that my porters deserted—and other lies, too. I knew you would n't leave me; you could n't send me back, and you 'd have to take me with you. But after—after all

you did—I could n't falsify; I could n't. . . . . Now you know the truth."

She halted—halted and waited for him to speak. But he did not. His eyes were still upon the bracelet, nor did he look up. The silence was long and tense. Finally, unable to endure it longer, she moved her hand tentatively; dropped it; raised it again and let it rest lightly upon his sleeve.

"You—you believe me—don't you?" she faltered.

He drew a deep breath; lifted his head.

"Yes," he said, looking across the river. "Yes, of course I believe you. I 'm only wondering what I 'm going to do with you."

He rose then and moved off rapidly toward the canebrake.

4

For over an hour Trent walked. When he returned to camp he found Dana Charteris sitting where he had left her. Masein had made a fire, and the leaping flames kindled a glow in the meshes of her red-gold hair. Eyes dark with misery met his—moist eyes. . . . . The cobra-bracelet glinted on his wrist.

"I was abrupt a while ago," he announced, halting before her, head slightly lowered—as a man stands before a cathedral-image. "I am sorry. I was worried. I should n't have left as I did, nor should I have stayed away so long, but I wanted to be alone—to solve the problem. I think I have."

She smiled faintly. "Don't apologize, Arnold Trent.

You 've done enough for me." She paused. "You must hate me," she pressed on after a moment. "First I deceive you; then I fall sick and delay you; and when I recover, I am a stone about your neck." She laughed a mirthless little laugh. "What are you going to do with me?"

He made a gesture. "You were right. I have n't a guide to send back with you, and you can't go alone. The nearest Government post is Kwanglu—that 's at least a two-days' journey. I can't afford to delay any longer. Yet if I take you with me and anything happens to you—" He hesitated, then finished: "I'd never forgive myself. So what am I to do?"

She got up, and her eyes shone with the warmth of the fire.

"I—I might be able to help you," she suggested rather timidly, as though afraid he would scorn the idea. "I 've hindered you so much that the least I can do is to try to make amends. Oh, I realize what you 're thinking, that I am a woman and would only be a burden, but—"

"No," he interrupted, "I was n't thinking that—I was thinking of you. God knows, from a selfish standpoint, I would be glad enough for your companionship! But aside from the physical danger, there are other things to reckon with. That 's the trouble with people; they don't consider the future. And if we come out of this alive, there 's a future. It 's all right for me; but you—you 're a woman. And the public does n't credit any man with honor, or any woman with self-respect,

if they 're thrown together under other than conventional circumstances. Don't you see what people will say when they learn of it? And they will learn of it —and you can't ignore their opinions. They could n't understand, damn them; rather, they *would n't*. . . . . You see?" Another pause, and he repeated: "You see?"

She nodded. "Yet I 'm here"—helplessly.

"Yet you 're here," he echoed, with a gesture of futility.

He strode away; turned back at a sudden thought.

"Of course, there 's one thing I 've overlooked in my masculine egotism. It just occurred to me that you —you might be afraid to go with me."

"No," she interposed very quietly—and to him the world seemed to expand to greater dimensions. "No. I am not afraid." That was all. Yet it thrilled him.

After a few seconds he resumed.

"You must promise to do as I say; and without asking questions. I 've given my word, you know. Before we reach Tali-fang you 'll have to be fixed up like a Hindu. You can be my brother, or anything you like. I 'll teach you a few more Hindustani words— necessary words. You won't have to talk much, if any. There will be hardships—many—but—" He furrowed his hair. "There 's no alternative."

Then, glancing down at the bracelet, he took it off.

"Here—"

"Won't you keep it?" she asked. "I sent it with a plea for succor, and you came. According to the cus-

tom, you are my bracelet-brother, sworn to honor and protect. So won't you keep it, as Humayun, the Great Mogul, kept the bracelet of Kurnavati, the Rani of Chitor?"

For answer he slipped the golden circlet over his hand. The girl, with a swift smile, turned and went into the tent. And, being a man, he could not know it was for the express purpose of crying.

CHAPTER X

CARAVAN

AHEAD, above a sea of indigo poppies, rose the walls of Tali-fang. Blue poppies rippled eastward and north to the foot of blue mountains (the seamed, craggy wastes that bulwarked Tibet); rippled westward and south until they melted into the blue haze of uncertain distance. Thus the city, with its dun-colored walls, swam in the poppies like an island against whose battlemented shore blue waves surged and tossed.

The cavalcade that rode through the veritable tunnel under the ramparts was hardly one to arouse suspicion in the mind of the blear-eyed Yunnanese soldier who drowsed in the damp dismal shadow of this gateway that was almost as ancient as China itself and under which at least one fifth of the opium that finds its way mysteriously to the Coast, and thence over the rim of the earth, had passed. To him it was merely a string of burdened, tired-looking mules, four half-naked savages—*yehjen*, as the Chinese call the hill-folk of Upper Burma—and two swarthy, turbaned men that he could not immediately classify and was too indolent, too saturated with drugs, to conjecture about.

Tali-fang was small and sprawling. Flies swarmed over it, as over a corpse, and the odor of it was very like that of the dead. Misty-eyed, morbific beings—

neither Trent nor Dana Charteris could call them human —lounged in the doorways of filthy houses: Mossos, Loutses, Chinese and Tibetans. City, inhabitants, all, seemed as old and iniquitous as sin itself.

After numerous inquiries they were directed to the *yamen* of the Tchentai, or military chief—a house with upcurling eaves, surrounded by a wall. A soldier informed them that his Excellency Fong Wa, the Tchentai, was at present indisposed, but if they would go to the inn he would send for them at the proper time.

The caravanserai was a mean, stinking place. If there was a *khan*-keeper he was nowhere in evidence. The hovel was deserted. Late in the afternoon two Mussulman soldiers appeared and told Trent that the Tchentai would receive him, and with Masein in tow (he left Dana Charteris, a slim, boyish figure, hair bound under a turban, sitting in a dejected heap in the courtyard) he followed them to the *yamen* of Fong Wa.

The mandarin was waiting in a court where orange-trees and pomegranates dappled the ground with shadow. From the manner in which he greeted Trent the latter suspected that the Chinaman knew he was white. His green eyes—vicious, cunning eyes—looked out from beneath puffed lids. As he talked a flat-breasted slattern attended him with a pipe and poppy treacle.

"I expected you many days before this," said his Excellency, through Masein. "I trust you have not been ill."

Trent replied that he had. After a few more courtesies, including gifts, the yellow man presented Trent with a wrapped packet.

"She who intrusted these papers into my keeping passed on the night of the new moon." Then, concluding the interview, he added: "Certain supplies and mules, together with a *makotou* and three *mafus,* will be sent to you some time to-morrow. You will then proceed as she directed."

"I wish to leave immediately," Trent told him. "I am late now."

"That is quite impossible," answered the mandarin, abruptly. "All is not ready."

"But if I was expected before this, then why aren't they ready?"

The Tchentai was not pleased with that question. The green eyes flickered.

"It is enough that I say it is impossible," he replied curtly. "I am military chief of Tali-fang. My word is law."

Trent suspected that the Chinaman, knowing he was white, was deliberately taking the opportunity to display his authority. He was muscle-sore and brain-tired, and the prospect of spending the night in this moribund city did not cheer him. With a slight movement he parted his jacket; the oval of coral lay against his stained skin.

"Tell his Excellency," he instructed Masein, noticing by Fong Wa's expression that he saw the pendant,

"that I demand the supplies and pack-animals to-night, now; and if he refuses, I shall report it to one whose authority reaches many miles beyond Tali-fang."

Revolutions have been ignited by fewer and less veiled words than those. . . . . The Chinaman's eyes burned like chrysoprase, and for a moment the Englishman thought he had lost. Then Fong Wa spoke and Masein translated.

"Your threats are useless, yet I will see what I can do." And Masein did not put into English the *chu-kou*, or pig-dog, that his Excellency added.

Trent left the *yamen* of the military chief in a very troubled state of mind. He knew he had struck flint —knew also that despite Fong Wa's evident fear of the "one whose authority reaches many miles beyond Tali-fang," there were ways and means of diverting circumstance to his cunning. For himself he had little fear; Dana Charteris was the source of concern.

A short distance away, one of the soldiers who had summoned Trent to the mandarin's house approached and addressed him in very bad English.

"*Tajen,*" he began, "seven days ago a Buddhist priest passed this way and left a message for you with Fong Wa. Because the Tchentai was angry, he did not give it to you. For three *taels* I will steal it and bring it to you."

Trent considered a moment before he said—

"When you deliver the message to me, I will give you three *taels.*"

This evidently satisfied the soldier, who grinned and hurried off toward the mandarin's residence.

"I think we'll leave Tali-fang to-night," Trent informed Dana Charteris when he reached the *khan*. "It 's the wisest move—for more than one reason. Suppose you rest; we may have to ride into the night, or until morning."

The girl shook her head. "I am not tired."

He saw that the town had tainted her—that she was struggling with one of those rare moments when glamour tarnished and she was close to surrender to her feelings. She had shone fine courage during the journey, flexing herself to meet every circumstance. Pure metal was behind those eyes. And it amazed him that she could meet the tests of the wilds and lose none of the feminine. (A romanticist always, this Trent, seeking in woman those elements that keep her in the vestal niche.) At times the call of her vibrated through his every nerve —but he had not forgot the circlet of gold. "Bracelet-brother." That he would be until they returned to metaled roads and electric-tramways; then the lover, with the lover's message to deliver. . . . .

"Don't trouble about me," she said. "When we get into the open spaces again it will be different; there our lungs won't be poisoned."

While Masein was cooking the evening meal the soldier who told of the purloined message appeared and in exchange for three *taels* pressed a folded sheet of rice-paper into Trent's hand. By the firelight the English-

man inspected it. It was written in Urdu and ran:

They tell a tale of Chunda Ram, the juggler, who made two cobras dance; of a mongoose that entered a lair and instead of vipers found a fat-bellied spider; of a lioness that guarded her whelps. You shall hear it—this tale of tales—from Rabsang Lama, who has journeyed north, into the falcon's country.

That was all—no signature. Trent read it and reread it. A fourth time his eyes traveled over the cryptic lines before he mined their meaning. Then he chuckled. Kerth—Kerth of many identities—was the lama who had passed through Tali-fang seven days before, and it was he who arrested Da-yak and Tambusami. The spider was Li Kwai Kung; the lioness the British Empire. The message came as a rift in gloom.

Perceiving the soldier who had brought the missive still standing close by, he directed a questioning look at him.

"I would speak with you alone, *Tajen,*" he said.

Trent started to rise, but Masein and the porters were not within earshot and he decided otherwise.

"Speak. This"—indicating the girl—"is my brother. What I know he knows."

Trent could have sworn that the soldier winked at him slyly as he said "brother," but it was too dark to be sure.

"*Tajen,* I came to warn you," he announced. "Fong Wa is not kindly disposed since your visit. He will send the mules and supplies, because he is a coward; but he has made it impossible for you to leave the city

to-night. All gates close at sunset, and he has issued an order that no caravan pass in or out."

Trent thought for some time before he spoke. Finally:

"What reason has he to wish to prevent me from leaving to-night?"

The soldier shrugged.

"*Ma-chai,*" he replied—which is the superlative of indifference.

That the Oriental had some ulterior motive Trent did not doubt for an instant. In a land where three thousand years of intrigue has bred a suspicious people, a kindly act is not the best symptom. He did not waste words, but asked:

"Why do you tell me this?"

Another shrug. "I am *houi-houi,*" he explained, that is to say, a Chinese Mussulman. "Fong Wa is a Lamaist dog. He is a leech that sucks blood from the people. They hate him. He never pays the soldiers and many are deserting to go down the Yangtze, where a war is brewing."

Trent kept silent, waiting to hear the purpose behind this introductory talk. The soldier was a reckless-looking fellow. The edge of his scant turban touched eyes that gleamed with a light inherited from a succession of robber-ancestors. An amiable young villain, he imagined.

"My name is Kee Meng," the Oriental volunteered. "My father was Tibetan, my mother Mosso. But I am Yunnanese. Oh, I have traveled much! Chung-king—even Hankow! I was *makotou* for an English *Tajenho*

who went from Liangchowfu to Urga. See,''—he drew a piece of paper from under his jacket—''this is a letter he wrote saying I was a very fine *makotou*—only he called me *bashi*—the very best in China. Read it, *Tajen.*''

Trent took the paper; glanced over it; waited.

''I will tell you something else, *Tajen,*'' Kee Meng continued. ''Your *makotou* and *mafus* are spies. She who passed on the night of the new moon told them to watch you and report to her at Shingtse-lunpo. I heard her. They are dogs and thieves, those muleteers.'' Then he bent closer, as though afraid he would be overheard. ''*Tajen,* I know the road to Shingtse-lunpo—I and my three friends. We have been there often to deliver messages from Fong Wa to the Grand Lama. Fong Wa is a tool of the lamas. He is a fool. We are tired of Tali-fang, my friends and I. We will serve you well. We are cheap. Only twenty *taels* a month. And look, *Tajen.*''

He turned and called a word, and three blue-jacketed, turbaned soldiers, each as reckless-looking as Kee Meng, entered and saluted Trent.

''See? Are they not fine muleteers?''

Instead of answering, Trent asked a question:

''What else do you know of her who passed on the night of the new moon—and a certain bird that roosts in Tibet?''

''She who passed on the night of the new moon?'' the Oriental echoed. ''Of her I know nothing, except that she would spy upon the *Tajen,* who, according to what

she told Fong Wa, is *Tajenho* in his country. And the bird—" He looked genuinely puzzled. "There are many birds in Tibet—kites and vultures! There are yaks, too, if the *Tajen* wishes to shoot."

Satisfied on that score, Trent went on:

"But what of my muleteers? I can't dismiss them. And if it's impossible to leave the city to-night—"

"*Tajen,*" Kee Meng broke in, "I know a way. Only speak the word and your four muleteers will disappear—like that!" And he made a gesture. "Then we, my friends and I, will lead you out of Tali-fang to-night; and Fong Wa will not know until it is too late. Once we are beyond the Yolon-noi, he has no power over us. He is Tchentai of only this district. By riding all night we would be in Tibet before sunrise—and there—" He made another gesture.

"How do I know you 're telling the truth?" queried Trent, putting forth a feeler. A plan was shaping in his mind. He did not look at Dana Charteris, but he felt her eyes upon him, felt, too, that she read his thoughts.

"By Allah!" declared the Mussulman (and a Mussulman's oath to his God is not so flexible as that of a Buddhist or a Christian). "May I wither and turn black if I lie!"

"What of my muleteers?" Trent pursued.

Kee Meng winked. "Ah, that is easy!"

"You would n't—"

"Oh no, *Tajen!* We will not kill them!" the soldier exclaimed virtuously—but he smiled. "There is an

unused house near the North Gate, and under the house is a cellar where opium is stored. We will hide them there, and they will not be found until morning."

"But how will we get out of the city?" Trent interrogated.

"Give me five *taels* and I will fix it. Mo-su, who guards the North Gate, is a poor man and a fool. Oh, it is easy if one is clever, as I am! Your mules and supplies are at the Tchentai's; to reach here they must pass through dark streets. We are strong. . . . . Then we can take your caravan to the North Gate, while one of us returns for you. We each have a mule. Oh yes, it will be easy, *Tajen!*"

Trent knew Kee Meng's type. "He who would ride a wild camel must first teach him who is master," says a proverb. These villainous-looking young brigands could fight—if the proper inducement were provided. It would be reassuring to know he had allies, few though they were. As for Sarojini Nanjee—"Set a spy on the heels of a spy," runs another proverb. It was not breaking his word to her; there was nothing in the agreement to prevent him from exchanging caravanmen. . . . . Too, he would feel safer beyond the reach of Fong Wa. He did not like those green eyes. Yet it was a desperate risk.

"What do you know of this city, this Shingtse-lunpo?"

"I know that there are many lamas there, *Tajen*—oh, many, like the blades of grass! There is a monastery called Lhakang-gompa, whose roofs are gold and whose walls are as white as the sky at midday! The

holy city of Lhassa is an open book beside it. Soldiers of the Golden Army guard every approach. There dwells the High Lama of all lamas."

Trent credited the "roofs of gold" to the elasticity of the native mind.

"That is strange," he commented, baiting the Mussulman. "If it is so great a city, then why do not the English, who sent an army to Lhassa and routed the Dalai Lama, know of it? White men have been in Tibet. If there is such a city, why has no one heard of it?"

Kee Meng shrugged.

"White men have been in Tibet, yes—but not in *that* part . . . . Tibet has its secrets, *Tajen;* she guards them well. My father, who was a Tibetan, said so."

After a pause Trent went on:

"There 's nothing to prevent you or your comrades from deserting me when we get under way. What assurance have I?"

"We swear by Allah to go with you to Shingtse-lunpo," said Kee Meng, "and from there wherever you wish to travel—so long as we receive twenty *taels* a month and half of the first month's pay in advance now!"

Accordingly, Kee Meng's comrades took oath.

"And obey me," Trent added.

"And obey you," the Mussulmen repeated.

Trent reached under his jacket, where his money-belt was concealed, and counted out twenty-five *taels.*

"Five for the guard at the gate," he explained, "and five apiece for the four of you. When we leave Tali-

fang you will each receive the other five agreed upon.''

''*Cheulo!*'' agreed Kee Meng. Then he let his eyes rove over the packs and mules. ''Have everything ready in an hour. Fong Wa expects you to try to leave to-night, so we will take your guides and mules to the gate and there transfer the packs to the fresh mules, sending back the men and old mules. If Fong Wa is watching, he will see them and believe you are returning to the inn. He will be very angry to-morrow, but he will not dare touch your porters, for they are *yehjen*. Remember—in an hour.''

The villainous-looking quartet quitted the courtyard, and Trent, watching them go, wondered if he had acted wisely.

''Your bodyguards when we reach Shingtse-lunpo,'' he said, turning to Dana Charteris and smiling slightly; then, glancing at the rice-paper in his hand, he added: ''From Euan Kerth. . . . . He 's on the way to the Falcon's city, as a lama.''

2

At the appointed time Kee Meng returned.

''All is well, *Tajen*,'' he told Trent. ''My friends are waiting at the gate, with the caravan.''

The small pack-train was assembled, and they left the inn. Kee Meng walked beside Trent. The Englishman let one hand rest upon the revolver strapped to his thigh; the girl riding at his side nervously fingered a corrugated butt. The streets were dim and for the most part deserted. Now and then doors opened and eyes

peered out, invisible but felt. Tali-fang lay in a sepulchral hush, its quiet only emphasized by jingling harness-chains and the dull, muffled beat of hoofs.

Trent's breathing quickened as they approached the walls. The tunnel leading to the gate yawned cavernously. In its gloom the pale eye of a lantern wavered. A mule brayed hideously as they rode into the foul artery. By the faint rays of the lantern Trent saw mules and ponies, packs and bulging saddle-bags; saw Kee Meng's villainous-looking comrades and a gaunt individual whom he imagined was the gateman. Kee Meng pressed him forward between the ill-smelling beasts. Dana Charteris was by his side. They dismounted.

There was a rasping sound and the ponderous gates swung apart. Starlight gleamed upon spiked panels. Framed in the archway were mountains and sky—dark loam smeared upon the firmament. A breath of clean air penetrated into the tunnel.

"*Tajen,* you and your brother get into the saddles," whispered Kee Meng. "I will tell your men to wait a few minutes before they go back to the inn."

Mule-harness rattled. One of the men uttered a sharp command, and a protesting quadruped moved through the gateway—another behind it. The mules were strung together, led by a man on foot. More jingling of harness; the soft *pad-pad* of hoofs.

Dana Charteris was trembling as Trent helped her upon her mount. The pony's coat was sleek and moist under his touch. He swung into his own saddle. . . . . The gates closed behind him. A figure that

looked like Kee Meng led the girl's pony forward, after the file of mules.

They were again in the clean temple of the open spaces.

. . . . Tali-fang fell away in the rear—a pale blot on the dim shivering mass of the poppy-fields. They skirted a hamlet not far from the city's walls. Dogs snarled; once more doors opened. . . . . The ground sloped ever upward, and from shadowy forests came the healing smell of pines. A buttressed range impended, its peaks virgin with snow—rugged mountains where in places the sides were sheer and rose to shuddersome heights. Toward this mighty chaos of rock—vomit of some earth-ailment—the road plunged.

Thus began the Yolon-noi Pass.

Loose stones rattled under the feet of the animals, and a wind, chilled in the cisterns of the night, swept down the cañon, shaking the scraggly growths and animating the shadows. The pass had narrowed to a mere rift where not more than four men could ride abreast. It seemed a place of shrieking demons when a mule brayed, for the wind snatched up the sound and carried it from boulder to boulder, until it perished in a weird echo upon the serrated ridges.

Just before midnight the moon rose and sent the gloom scurrying, and jackals laughed as though to mock the terrors that a moment ago seemed so real. Moonlight shone on scintillant rock; the loftiest, snow-capped peaks gleamed like palest nacre. . . . . Trent rode beside Dana Charteris. The caravan-men and the pack-

animals were ahead, moving with a slow, uneven rhythm, the long line of laden beasts casting distorted shadows upon the road.

"O Arnold Trent, I could cry for sheer joy!" whispered the girl. "Can't you feel the night singing in your veins? Tibet! To think I should ever reach it!"

Trent's throat tightened, and the wind sang one word —*Tibet! Tibet!*—over and over in his ears. He rode on, so flooded with awe, with an overwhelming sense of majesty, that it was impossible to speak. Presently the girl, obeying an impulse, tore off her turban. Her hair tumbled over her shoulders, and the wind caught truant strands and made sport of them.

Through the night they traveled; traveled until the high walls broke up into lower ridges and ravines; until the moon rolled over the peaks and into oblivion, and the stars passed, as tapers that grow dim and die. The gorge opened its mouth into a valley that lay between green, snow-tipped mountains. With dawn they came to a halt, and the muleteers set up the shelters. The girl, tired from the long ride, fell asleep almost instantly, but Trent sat in front of his tent for nearly an hour, smoking and gazing into the haze of ruddy gold that hid the City of the Falcon.

3

Looking back upon the journey to Shingtse-lunpo, Trent saw it in a series of pictures—the days painted with vivid, glaring pigments, the nights pasteled in

blended hues. It was not the Tibet of his imagination, the Tibet of drear, waterless stretches shut in by bastioned mountains, unscalable, snow-helmeted guards. True, for two days after the passing of the Chino-Tibetan divide and the Mekong (they were swung across this great river, at a giddy height, on a rope bridge) bleak ranges lifted themselves in heaps of purple and dun, crowned with flame as the sun gilded their snowy ramparts; but after that the ground was mildly undulating—nullahs and hills and thin forests.

The fourth day marked their entrance into a country of little vegetation, a world of dull tints—those lifeless shades of brown found in a camel's coat. The earth was sterile; even the sky seemed unyielding, an aching womb of light. Fine dust settled upon the body and in the nostrils and throat.

Of people they saw comparatively little. The villages generally consisted of a huddle of houses close to a spur of ground, upon the highest point of which a lamasery perched, like a *lämmergier* hovering over mulch and decay. The lamas, Trent learned, were of the Yellow Cap Order—a sullen, suspicious lot.

Trent tried, whenever it was practicable, to avoid human beings; he was not so much afraid of the penetrability of his own disguise as that of the girl. The caravans they encountered now and then—strings of men and mules and yaks—were a constant dread to him; not the Tibetans (they were a careless, friendly type, these men and women of Kham), but the priests who usually accompanied them. In every instance the

lamas inquired through Kee Meng the destination of the pack-train.

The wind was usually chilling, except at midday when the earth quivered behind a brassy curtain of mirage and the glare of sunlight on quartz-like rocks was blinding. Sunset—a phenomenon of Tibet—was a source of never-ending wonder to both Trent and Dana Charteris. It flared in five distinct bars, like a crimson aurora, and died away when dusk swept a mauve brush across the west. Nightfall brought bitter winds. Stars glittered coldly, points of whitest flame; and when the moon came out it glistened like an icy planet reeling through space.

Trent grew to trust Kee Meng and his comrades—to a degree. It was a common occurrence for him to catch one or the other stealing from the provisions, and more than once he discovered gold and turquoise ornaments filched from a temple in some village where they remained overnight. Twice Trent's electric pocket-lamp disappeared, only to be found each time among the possessions of Kee Meng, who burned with a steady passion to own it. Trent maintained rigid discipline over his quartet of genial young brigands, who would have been impossible to rule otherwise; and whereas they learned he was master of the caravan and to be obeyed at all times, he could not tear down the walls of instinct which generations of *hung-hu-tzee* ancestors had fixed so immovably in them.

. . . . The journey wove into a tapestry of monotonous colors stretching over a loom of many days, and

through it all, like a silver thread, ran his association with Dana Charteris. His every chord of feeling responded to the age-old symphony of a woman unfolding to a man (the glorious hymn of the universe) . . . . He knew there were times, after he had wrapped himself in his blanket for the night, that she wept from sheer exhaustion, tortured physically by the hard travel and mentally by the ever-present portent of danger which the very atmosphere seemed to speak. But not once did he see evidence of it, nor did she complain. After a day of riding, himself sweaty and caked with dust, his every sinew strained to the utmost, the moral effect of her presence was a narcotic.

Despite the discomforts and the uncertainty of what lay ahead, something serene came to him out of the silence. He saw it in the girl's eyes, too—this intangible thing that the far spaces breed in the hearts of men and that lies slumbering until they have returned to civilization, where, in the midst of crowded, suffocating cities, it awakens suddenly, drawing them back to the trackless wastes they once had hated and cursed. The intense light on the hills; the glow of firelight in the dusk; the cry of a wolf wavering through the night—they were the small incidents that would cling to the memory and, later, seem the salient features of a weird, fascinating scroll of recollections.

Green-roofed temples and whitewashed lamaseries daily became more numerous. They squatted on every eminence and were habited by crimson-togaed

monks—hundreds of men and boys who rattled prayer-wheels and muttered *"Om mani Padme hums"* before greasy idols. The presence of women in those lamaist communities ceased to be a novelty; rather, a question. They were not unlovely, in their loose garments and turquoise-studded bandeaus, but their instinctive hostility toward any form of ablution disqualified them from meeting Western standards of beauty.

Thus the journey wore on, and thus, on the evening of the seventh day, they camped on the edge of a marshy lake, within view of scarped hills behind which Shingtse-lunpo, the mysterious, lay.

CHAPTER XI

CITY OF THE FALCON

DAWN gave birth to a day that for Trent and Dana Charteris was surcharged with expectancy and apprehension. Ridges broke up the horizon, hiding the country beyond, as though fate and nature had conspired to preclude until the last moment a view of Shingtse-lunpo. Before another night they should be within the walls of the city.

Just before noon they rode over a crest and saw a high *tchorten,* or rock pyramid. Yak-hair tents were pitched at its base, and a band of men, mounted on white ponies and carrying yellow-pennoned lances, clattered across the valley to meet them.

"They are soldiers of the Golden Army," Kee Meng announced.

As the horsemen drew nearer, Trent could see that they wore neutral-colored tunics and black leather caps, the latter having a strap under the chin and a golden, flame-shaped ornament attached to the top. Gold-hilted swords glittered in black belts, and several of the men carried queer, ancient-looking guns embossed with turquoise and coral. They came up in a cloud of dust, like figures riding out of history, and the leader stuck out his tongue by way of greeting. He examined

their passports and assigned two soldiers—"to accompany us to Amber Bridge," Kee Meng explained.

With their escort they rode on toward the heat-twisted, quivering horizon that, in its very illusiveness, symbolized the uncertainty that filled both Trent and the girl. Neither spoke, but sat erect on their mounts, staring steadily, until their eyes ached, into the white sunlight.

The hot midday was waning when they reached the top of a shoulder of ground and looked upon the city. At first it was a long white blur upon the distant ranges, separated from the plain that surrounded it by a belt of green; then it assumed shape and form, and they saw it, walls and golden roofs, floating like a fabulous Atlantis in the liquid sunlight. A white bulk, seeming the extravagant creation of a mirage, towered above the walls. Gradually it emerged from the deceptive heat-waves and stood out, defined, a massive building, dominating the crenellated heap of masonry at its feet. The city's ramparts were high, yielding only a glimpse of roof-tops and the buttressed structure that was silhouetted in blinding white upon the aquamarine sky.

"The great building," said Kee Meng, "is Lhakang-gompa, of which I told you—the palace and temple of the Grand Lama."

As they rode nearer, passing barley fields and isolated groups of houses, it became evident that the belt of green encircling Shingtse-lunpo was a marsh. Apparently an outer fortification at one time stood in the swamp, for piles of broken stone reared themselves at

intervals from the rush-encumbered quagmires, like the bones of a half-buried and bleaching skeleton. On the edge of the morass, flung across a stream, was a bridge; a stone causeway, perhaps a mile in length, linked it with what Trent imagined was the main gate of the city proper. The bridge itself—"Amber Bridge," Kee Meng had called it—was of mellowed stone, its enclosing walls supporting a roof glazed with tiles and inset with great lumps of raw amber. Prayer-flags drooped from the top.

Thus Shingtse-lunpo, the City of the Falcon, revealed herself to them for the first time, like an orient dream-city in the golden noonday.

As they approached Amber Bridge, two familiar lines sprang into Trent's mind and repeated themselves over and over:

> With gilded gates and sunny spires ablaze,
> And burnished domes half seen through luminous haze.

In the silence, sovereign but for the footfalls of the animals and the creak of sweaty saddles, he heard the swift breathing of the girl who rode at his side—saw the wonderment, the expression of fascination, of awe, that reflected in her face. Brown eyes were deep with mystery.

At the bridge they were halted by more leather-helmeted guards who, after glancing at their passports, held a short conversation with the two soldiers from the outpost, then explained, through the usual channel of translation, that Trent's caravan would have to remain

at Amber Bridge until the news of their arrival was communicated to "certain authorities" in the city.

A soldier dashed off along the causeway, while Trent, vaguely troubled, allowed his pony to be led into a mud-walled compound at one side of the road. There he and the other members of the caravan dismounted, and there they waited, somewhat apprehensive, for over an hour.

When the messenger returned he was accompanied by a small cortège, all soldiers but one, who, from his dress, was a dignitary of the city. He rode a white horse and wore a robe of orange-yellow brocaded silk, its wide sleeves faced with peacock-blue. A mushroom-shaped hat surmounted copper-hued Tibetan features. He greeted Trent very graciously in English and informed him that he was Na-chung, a member of the Higher Council, that meaning, he explained, those who assisted the Governor. He said that no doubt it was surprising to hear him speak English, but that he had learned it from a British officer at Gyangtse, at the time of the expedition to Lhassa. . . . . His Transparency the Governor, he stated, had been expecting him for several days and his delay had caused his Transparency no small concern. Then he looked over Trent's men —and when his eyes reached Dana Charteris they halted. It was, for Trent, a breathless moment. But Na-chung smiled amiably and said:

"I understood there were to be only *four* caravaneers. You have *five*."

Trent replied that none of the four assigned to him

at Tali-fang spoke Tibetan—and how could he travel in Tibet without an interpreter? Therefore, he had presumed to add another to his caravan. . . .

Na-chung continued to smile. "I see," he commented. "And this is the one you added?"—with a gesture toward the girl.

"No," returned Trent. "This one"—indicating Kee Meng.

"I see," repeated Na-chung. "We shall go into the city now, to the house which the Governor has provided for you."

The incident at Amber Bridge had a depressing effect upon Trent and he scarcely heard the inconsequential talk of Na-chung as they moved slowly over the causeway toward the ramparts of Shingtse-lunpo. But when they passed the gates—formidable, iron-studded affairs, with turrets at either side—his fears were temporarily thrust into the background. For the walls of Shingtse-lunpo only hinted at what they enclosed.

Beyond the main town, which sloped down into a depression and was a wilderness of narrow streets and dazzling whitewashed houses (some roofed with blue tiles, others with burnished gold), the ground rose to the one dominating structure—the Lamasery that stood, sheer-walled, upon sharply truncated rocks. Its massive bulk—longer than two city blocks, Trent hazarded—was pierced by row upon row of windows that seemed no larger than loopholes, and naked walls fell away from torn roofs and terrace-like additions. There were other large buildings and tiers of houses, the doors of

the upper rows opening upon the roofs of those below, but they cowered beneath the regal mass of Lhakang-gompa, an architectural masterpiece that rose at least two hundred feet from its natural foundations and which Trent could compare only with the descriptions he had heard of the Potala at Lhassa.

From the main gate the road cleaved between brick-walled enclosures and hedges of bamboo. Beggars, ragged, repulsive-looking creatures, whined at the roadside, and dogs and swine nosed in the black, bubbling mud of the gutters. Blenching human bones lay beside discolored slabs of stone, and mailed dragonflies, drawn by the smell of carrion flesh, hovered near.[1]

From this filthy quarter they passed over another bridge and into a highway that lay in the shadows of fortress-like buildings. It was crowded with tonsured, magenta-robed priests. Mounted soldiers, the majority in neutral-tinted tunics, but some few wearing royal-blue and apricot-hued uniforms, threaded across the crimson swarm in a human shuttle, while men and women in less gaudy apparel moved inconspicuously through the throng. Yak-hair curtains and prayer-flags drooped from the windows of houses.

"You arrived at a time of celebration," said Nachung. "The Feast of the Sacred Dance began yesterday. To-day the races were held on the Field of Ceremonies, and to-morrow will be celebrated by the Dance

[1] In Tibet it is the custom to deliver the dead to a sect of professional body-hackers, who, in turn, feed the remains to the dogs and vultures. Thus merit is acquired by the family of the deceased.

of the Gods, wrestling-bouts and the archery contest."

Na-chung proved most voluble. He talked on as they forsook the crowded street for a quarter close to the lamasery. The soldiers, who were leading, opened a gate in a high white wall, and the caravan moved into a flagged court.

The dwelling was typical of the better Tibetan residences, low and flat-roofed, and in the shape of a quadrangle. To the left, beyond a huddle of out-houses, was a garden. Willow-thorn, clematis and—hollyhocks! The scarlet flowers, pure flame in the sunlight, gave something of warming welcome to Trent.

Na-chung led the way into the house. The main hall was dank, like an empty cistern, and lighted by an opening in the ceiling, which served a twofold purpose in that it was also a means of reaching the upper floor. There were little or no furnishings, and narrow passages, black with gloom, led off from it.

"It would be advisable," said Na-chung as he prepared to leave, "that you do not leave your courtyard; that is, until you have been provided with proper garments. I shall acquaint his Transparency with your presence, and in the morning one will be sent to"—the councillor smiled—"to remove your beard and clothe you as befits a member of the Higher Council. Tomorrow I shall return and accompany you to the Court of Ceremonies, after which his Transparency will no doubt receive you." Then, following a pause, "It has been deemed advisable to elevate you to membership in the Higher Council—for appearances only, as your

duties will be quite different from those of a councillor.''

He took his leave then, and Trent accompanied him into the court. He observed that Na-chung left two leather-helmeted soldiers at the gate, whether to act as bodyguards, or to see that he did not leave the grounds, he could only surmise.

2

Trent and Dana Charteris made a thorough inspection of the house. The rooms were clean, as clean as Tibetan rooms ever are; but the lack of proper ventilation and the ever-present stale-sweet odors did little to invite occupancy. From the roof the monastery and a portion of the town could be seen, and there, in a space protected by the high masonry that enclosed the housetop, the girl decided to quarter herself, while Trent chose the room directly beneath.

Before sundown, while Dana Charteris was overseeing the transportation of her packs to her elevated abode, Trent sought Kee Meng and found him in the quadrangle.

''I am going to place my brother in your charge,'' he announced. ''I will probably be away from him much of the time, and if anything happens to him—'' He chose to leave the sentence unfinished. (Trent always spoke of the girl as his ''brother,'' although it was tacitly understood that Kee Meng knew she was not a man.)

''Cheulo!'' responded the Mussulman. ''Henceforth, instead of *makotou,* I am Protector-of-the-Brother!''

"And furthermore," Trent added, "I forbid you, or any of the men, to leave the grounds without my permission."

Later (dusk had swooned on Shingtse-lunpo), as Trent entered the main hall, which was unlighted except for a brass butter-lamp, he beheld a naked brown ankle and the bottom of a red robe as they vanished into one of the several black cavities opening upon the chamber. He stopped—then quickly backing to one side, against the wall, he drew his revolver and edged toward the passageway. When he was yet a few feet away a round, blue muzzle leaped out to meet him. As he recoiled, the owner of the ankle and robe, a lama with a very modern automatic gripped in one slim hand, stepped out. They stood motionless for a space of seconds, each with weapon lifted. Then a familiar satanic smile traced itself upon the yellow countenance—a smile that made the lama look Mephistophelian, despite his shorn head and hairless features.

"Kerth"—as Trent lowered his revolver, smiling. "Always at pistol-point. . . ."

"I was beginning to feel uneasy about you," said Euan Kerth, as their hands met. "It was a relief when I saw your pack-train ride in to-day. Where can we go to talk—the garden? I came that way."

They left the house by a black-dark corridor, making their way into the grove of willow-thorn. Bright stars peered down through the branches, and the moon, floating above the white wall, reflected a faint, hazy light among the shadowy trees.

"I 'd almost given you up," Kerth began, halting in the gloom beside the wall. "You were due over a week ago."

Trent had been debating with himself since the meeting in the house. Now he spoke; told Kerth of Dana Charteris; of the meeting in Calcutta and the subsequent happenings. Kerth saw a story within a story and surmised certain things that Trent omitted. He was silent for a while after the latter finished.

"It complicates matters, of course," he ventured discreetly, at length, "yet . . . . hmm . . . . no, you had no alternative. She had nerve, all right; how many women would have dared to do that? Damn these meddling police agents! If it had n't been for her brother . . . . Hmm—and he had the Pearl Scarf!" A pause. "D 'ye think Sarojini knows of her presence?"

"Miss Charteris? How could she?" Then Trent explained how he had exchanged muleteers at Tali-fang.

"Good!" exclaimed Kerth. "Good! That 's a score against Sarojini. She 'll raise thundering hell when she learns of it, but I think you can tame her—yes, you can do it."

"But tell me what happened at Myitkyina"—this from Trent.

The other shrugged. "Oh, nothing much. I had suspected we were headed for Tibet since I learned the character of the god on the symbol of the Order—yet this"—he made a gesture intended to include the city —"well, this is a bit beyond my imagination."

Briefly he then sketched his activities at Myitkyina.

"I followed you and Da-yak to the river that night, then downstream in another boat. After you had landed, and your servant, Tambusami, in another boat, I swam ashore. There was one fellow waiting with the boats, so I slipped up behind him. . . . . After that it was n't difficult. I exchanged clothing with him and waited. Sarojini Nanjee, dressed as a Kachin, returned in a few minutes, and with her, Da-yak, Tambusami and the boatmen. She and the Kachins took one of the craft downstream, I suppose to her camp, and Da-yak and your bearer got into the other boat—the boat where I was waiting. I 'd sent a note to Warburton, the C. O. at Myitkyina, and he was waiting at the landing with several Gurkhas. We did n't have any trouble arresting them; the trouble came when we tried to force them to speak. All summed up, what they said was surprisingly little. Tambusami declared he was simply a servant and knew nothing about the Order, except that it existed. But Da-yak told where you had gone, and said there were three men in Myitkyina who knew the trail to Tali-fang. One of them I later hired. Da-yak said that up until a year ago he had a shop in the bazaar at Shingtse-lunpo, which he described as 'a great city where many lamas live'; that he was commanded by a Grand Lama to go to Myitkyina and establish a business. He was instructed to obey all who came to him with a certain symbol—the symbol of the Order. He swore he knew nothing of the Falcon or the jewels."

Kerth paused; peered into Trent's face; smiled.

"You 're thinking just as I wish you to think," he

observed; then went on: "Meanwhile, I 'd reported the place in Calcutta and it had been raided. What happened I don't know. I was ready to start for Shingtse-lunpo the day after you left, but of course Delhi waited a couple of days to telegraph permission—and I was glad enough to get it then, for I was half afraid the Viceroy would refuse to let me go into Tibet. At Talifang I learned you had n't passed and I left a message —you received it? . . . . Eighteen days later I was inside the walls of Shingtse-lunpo—and paying homage to his Holiness Sâkya-mûni, the Buddha reincarnated."

"You mean," Trent interrogated, "there 's a lama here who 's supposed to be a reincarnation of Buddha?"

Kerth nodded. "That 's his palace"—indicating Lhakang-gompa. "Oh, we 've stumbled into a jolly little nest! It 'll take your breath when I tell you everything. This—Shingtse-lunpo—is everything that Lhassa was, and a hundred things that Lhassa never could be, with Lhassa's secretiveness and holiness intensified to the nth degree. It 's the—well, I suppose one might call it the secret capital of the Lamaist hierarchy. From all I can learn, it has n't always had the great significance and power that it has now; until a few years ago it was simply the home of a Grand Lama who ranked with the Tarnath Lama. Nobody knew of it, because explorers have n't covered this part of Tibet; the nearest anybody ever came to this particular strip of territory was some time ago when a naturalist made his way into Kham, and again, later, when an American doctor went to a place called Chi-

amdo. . . . . They say the Dalai Lama actually hid here, in Lhakang-gompa (which, incidentally, is a facsimile of the Potala at Lhassa, which I saw with the Mission) before he went to Urga. But that's monkish gossip. . . . . At any rate, here's how I interpret affairs from all I've heard:

"After the Mission was sent to Lhassa the Dalai Lama lost a certain amount of prestige. The authority of the Tashi Lama, as you probably know, is more spiritual than temporal. Englishmen had been to Lhassa and to Tashi-lunpo; therefore, both of their holy-of-holies had been profaned. The lamas—that is, the hierarchy—were losing their hold on the people. All that was before nineteen-twelve. Then the President of China restored Tubdan Gyatso, the Dalai Lama, to Lhassa. But even that failed to revive the old zeal. So a *coup d'état* was planned. A Grand Lama had a made-to-order vision in which he saw the soul of Gaudama Siddartha descend into the body of one of the abbots. From that moment the abbot was Sâkya-mûni, Buddha reincarnated, and they installed him in Lhakang-gompa, here in Shingtse-lunpo, the secret city *par excellence* of Tibet. Lhassa and the Dalai Lama became figureheads —'to fool the British,' as one priest put it to me. The monasteries of Sera, Debung and Gaden, hotbeds of political intrigue in the time of the Dalai Lama and the Buriat, Dorjieff, were no longer powerful, but subservient to Lhakang-gompa. I understand the Tashi Lama objected to all this, but the Yellow Caps overruled him. . . . . So now Sâkya-mûni, with the Lamaist

hierarchy behind him, is supreme pontiff of the Church —and Lhakang-gompa is the Vatican, as it were, from which he rules Tibet and practically all of Mongolia, with certain *sub rosa* wires that give him power in Nepal, Sikkhim, Bhutan and parts of China."

Trent was staring up through the branches at the stars, but as Kerth stopped he looked down and asked:

"Did n't you say you had an audience with him?"

Kerth's shaven skull nodded. "Yes. The Living Buddha wears a veil at all ceremonies—too holy for mortal eyes, I fancy. Of course the Grand Lamas have seen his face, but in the presence of the laity he is always veiled. I attended what might be called pontifical mass. In company with a number of pilgrim priests—at Shingtse-lunpo for the Feast of the Sacred Dance—I was conducted through a veritable labyrinth in the monastery and to a huge cathedral-like place. Sâkya-mûni, in yellow robes and with a golden veil over his face, sat on a throne at one end. Many cardinals and high officials were there, including the Great Magician of Shingtse-lunpo. After the ceremony the Living Buddha murmured something about *'Om, Ah, Hum'* and blessed a lot of red scarves, or *katags* as they 're called, and distributed them among the pilgrim priests. Then we left."

In the pause that followed Trent inserted:

"What of the jewels?"

Another shrug from Kerth. "If they 're in Shingtse-lunpo, they are well hidden and their presence is n't widely known."

"Yet—" But Trent checked himself.

"Yet Sarojini Nanjee said they were here," Kerth finished up. "I know it. The fact that I have n't learned anything about them does n't mean they are n't here."

"And you have n't seen Sarojini?"

"If I did, it was without my knowledge."

"Or—Chavigny?"

Kerth laughed quietly. "If I did n't *know* he existed, I 'd believe him a myth. No, I have n't seen Chavigny, nor heard of him, for that matter, since I entered the city. But that 's not queer, for if he were here he would n't advertise the fact."

Trent motioned toward the lamasery. "Do you suppose he had a hand in the jewel affair?"

"Who? Sâkya-mûni? If not, why were the gems brought to Shingtse-lunpo? And remember: a *Grand Lama* sent Da-yak to Myitkyina."

"But—"

"I agree with you," Kerth cut in, anticipating him. "It *is* preposterous. It 's evident that Chavigny has the alliance of the lamas, but how did he get it? I have n't told you the strongest link in that chain yet. You 'll recall that a Grand Lama from a Tibetan monastery emulated the example of the Tashi Lama and made a pilgrimage to the Sacred Bo-tree at Gaya just about the time the gems were stolen?"

Trent's jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

"Precisely," continued Kerth, reading the other's thoughts. "I believe the lamas who pilgrimaged to

Buddh-Gaya carried the jewels out of India. I have foundation for this theory, too. Since my arrival here I 've learned that a number of the monks who went on that pilgrimage were from Shingtse-lunpo—and they have n't returned yet!''

Trent was subconsciously following a detached idea. He remembered that the priests were at Gaya on the night Manlove was murdered, and if their purpose was that suggested by Kerth, it furnished a reason for Chavigny being there. . . . .

''Nor is that all I know,'' Kerth resumed. ''Caravan-loads of rifles have been brought here from Mongolia —*Russian* rifles—also gunpowder and dynamite. They 're stored in the armory under the monastery. Has that any significance to you? . . . . Trent, we may yet bring down a brace of birds when we only expected to pot one. . . . . I 'm more than a little concerned with Sarojini Nanjee; I can't adjust her with this business. What are her secret strings that give her so much power? What can she expect to do alone? She has a trump card up her sleeve, mark my words. She 's no fool, and I 'd feel deucedly better if I were certain she was going to play that card for us.''

''She promised,'' Trent reminded.

Kerth smiled wryly, but the smile passed quickly.

''Captain Manlove?'' he queried. ''You 've learned nothing?''

Trent shook his head. The silence after that was heavy. Kerth ended it.

''I can't stay any longer now. I 'm cultivating the

abbot of one of the lesser monasteries, with the view of eventually being assigned to a cell in Lhakang-gompa. I 've a suspicion I'll find something of interest there, if I ever get in. I daresay you 're scheduled to witness the ceremonies to-morrow, so I won't have an opportunity to see you until to-morrow night, but I 'll return then, about this hour." He extended his lean hand. "Here 's luck to you!"

"The same," Trent responded with a smile, gripping his hand. "How 'd you get in?"

Kerth indicated the wall. "Give me a lift, will you?"

Trent clasped his hands, and, by stepping into the foothold thus formed, Kerth was able to grasp the top of the wall and draw himself up. There he sat for a moment, looking below on the other side; then, with a wave of farewell, he dropped from sight.

Trent returned to the house, passing the muleteers who were gathered about a fire in the quadrangle, and climbed to the roof. Dana Charteris was there—but asleep. For a space of seconds he stood looking down at the slim form. Her head was pillowed upon one arm and utter weariness lined the features that were revealed in the moonlight—pale, starry features. He felt a warm rush of sympathy, a moment when he loathed himself for having brought her into danger. . . . . He turned away, moving quietly to the shaft.

At the top of the ladder he paused. The city lay before him, patches of gloom and shadow, beneath the dark bulk of the lamasery. To think that there, among those huddled buildings, was a key to the riddle—a

solution that would dispel the nebulous clouds, perhaps clear the mystery of Manlove's death!

A wave of the old bitterness swept up through him; swept up and cast his features into a mold of grim resolution.

3

The next morning Trent told Dana Charteris of his talk with Euan Kerth; also, that Kee Meng was to be her bodyguard.

"But surely I can leave the compound?" she objected. "I would like to see the festival to-day—and, oh, it would be frightful here, waiting, with nothing to do! I 'd worry about you every moment, yet with something to distract me . . . . don't you see?"

He considered a long time before he decided.

"I 'm afraid it would n't be wise. There 's no accounting for what might happen, and then . . . ." He made a movement as though to furrow his hair, but instead passed his hand over his turban. "I 'm sorry, but the risk is too great. You won't go, will you?"

She promised.

Shortly before noon Na-chung, accompanied by his escort, arrived. The Tibetan superintended the transformation of Trent from a Hindu merchant to a lamaist dignitary. It was after one o'clock when the Englishman, shaved and dressed like Na-chung—orange-yellow robe, mushroom hat and all—mounted a pony in the quadrangle, and, with the councillor at his side and a file of helmeted soldiers behind, clattered away from the

house. As he passed out of the gate he looked back for a glimpse of Dana Charteris, but did not see her. A vague sense of unrest enclosed him.

Toward Lhakang-gompa they rode, through swarms that pressed eagerly in the direction of the monastery. Prayer-flags were festooned from house to house, and women sat by the roadside selling dried fruit and sweetmeats.

In the very shadow of the monster building, where the rocks fell away from its base, they dismounted. The serrated façade piled itself above them in a series of inward-sloping ledges, reaching a shuddersome height before it met the helium-like blaze of golden roofs. The soldiers remained with the horses, while Na-chung led Trent through a gate and a courtyard—the latter a veritable abyss between the main building and outer walls—and into a dark corridor that reeked with rancid odors.

Thus began a journey that carried them through dim chambers and black halls; through cloisters heavy with incense and faintly lighted rooms where lamas, sitting before prayer-wheels, murmured passages from Buddhist scriptures; through courts that were cool and sunk deep in the shadow of lofty walls; until, at length, they came out into bright sunlight.

At first the intense glare stung Trent's eyes, but gradually he became accustomed to it and saw that they had emerged on the other side of the lamasery and were upon a gallery overlooking a huge amphitheater. He hazarded a guess that it measured about half a mile around. An incline led down from the gallery, between

rows of seats and stalls, and along this slanting aisle and into a box close to the immense center court Na-chung conducted him. There, seated on cushions beside the councillor, he had an opportunity fully to absorb the bewildering spectacle.

Tier after tier of stalls and terraced seats were packed against the retaining walls. Marquees of striped silk, flying maroon and flame-colored flags, had been erected around the edge of the arena. In the far end stood a gilded, silk-draped proscenium, and raised upon it, under a gold-fringed canopy, was a daïs. On either side of the platform, herded together and kept within their boundaries by guards armed with halberds, were hundreds of lamas—patches of cinnabar-red. At the left of the arena, starkly silhouetted upon the walls, was a line of stakes; their purpose puzzled Trent. Every available space, except the vast center-court and the proscenium, was crowded with richly dressed onlookers. There were Tibetan dukes and duchesses, the turquoise-studied aureoles of the latter gleaming like blue fire; soldiers and government dignitaries; high lamas wearing saffron vestments, and novices in red togas; pilgrims from Ladak, Nepal, Sikkhim, Bhutan, Kham and Mongolia; men and women garbed in silks and satins and decked with jewels. The many-hued robes and the colored banners and standards—gold, cerise, ocher, lavender-blue and neutral-tint predominating—were like vivid splashes on a giant palette.

The box where Trent and Na-chung sat was one of a row that was occupied by men in the orange-yellow robes

and mushroom hats of the Higher Council. Many of these bronze-faced dignitaries were accompanied by women in maroon garments and silver coral-adorned aureoles. Inquisitive eyes were turned toward Trent and Na-chung, and the latter bowed and smiled.

"Yonder," explained the Tibetan, indicating a long carpet of imperial yellow that dazzled from a flight of stone steps at one side of the arena to the proscenium in the remote end, "is where His Holiness will walk. And that"—inclining his head toward a nearby stall where a prelate in claret-colored garments sat in the midst of shaven-pated satellites—"is the Great Magician. It is rumored that he and His Holiness have—er—had some misunderstanding."

Thus he gossiped while Trent, searching the ranks of the laity below for a familiar face and aware of something imminent and compelling in the subdued buzzing of many voices, listened only half attentively.

Without warning a trumpet gave voice to a blast. It seemed to inject a sudden thrill into the atmosphere. Trent felt his muscles grow tense, and involuntarily his eyes sought the broad stone stairway.

At the top yak-hair curtains parted for a moment and a group of heralds bearing long copper horns filed out. Came another blast, monstrously loud. A shout rose from the multitude; died. Trent heard a faint, minor chant—coming from behind the yak-hair curtains, he imagined. When this intoning ceased, trumpets blared again; the curtains at the stairhead parted.

Hushed expectancy shut down like a tangible weight.

The rapid play of sunlight on lances and bare blades, on burnished helmets and golden accoutrements, seemed a visible manifestation of the feverish intensity that charged the throng. The majority were standing with bowed heads; some had prostrated themselves. Anticipation transfigured every face.

Then the head of the pontifical procession came into view.

Leading were the lictors, with lamaic emblems; then acolytes with golden censers and chalices. They moved slowly down the steps and along the yellow carpet. Following them strode the secular lords and cardinals—bronze-faced prelates in rich, deep-yellow robes and yellow mitres. Laymen marched at their heels, carrying silken cushions.

And toward the rear, beneath a golden state-umbrella, attended by Grand Lamas of the Gelugpa, walked the reincarnation of Gaudama Siddartha, His Holiness Lobsang Yshe Naksang Sâkya-mûni, the Yellow Pope of Tibet. He bore the insignia of his pontifical rank in one hand, in the other a rosary. A mitre was set upon his head. From beneath this peaked hat fell a golden veil that shimmered in the sunlight and blended with the yellow-gold pallium and wide stole that hung from his shoulders.

The living deity moved slowly over the yellow carpet; mounted the proscenium; sank cross-legged, hands folded, like a Buddha, upon the daïs.

Banners and standards were lifted in salute above the countless faces that blurred against the terraced

seats. A detachment of soldiers in lavender-blue uniforms and brazen helmets clattered out of a door in the arena and formed a line in front of the gilded proscenium. Flash of sunlight on helmets and lifted lances; gleam of wrought gold and brazen accoutrements; a rippling play of gold. Then horses were wheeled, and the Tibetan cavalry trotted out of the arena.

Sâkya-mûni removed his mitre. Which proved a signal for the ceremonies to begin.

A clarion blare announced a new group of lamas—priests wearing white robes and hideous masks, representing mythological demons. They paid obeisance to the supreme pontiff and gathered at one side of the proscenium. After them came other lamas, in golden harness and mantles the flame hue of nasturtiums.

"They are the ancient warriors," explained Na-chung to Trent. "And those"—waving his hand toward another group that was debouching from a gateway below the tiered seats—"are the contestants in the wrestling matches."

The sinewy Tibetan gladiators saluted Sâkya-mûni. They wore only pelts of snow-leopards girded about their hips. Their skin, between knees and throat, was surprisingly fair. The wrestling tourney lasted for over two hours. Na-chung explained every detail to Trent who, toward the end of the lengthy show of physical skill, was growing weary of it. Too, his eyes ached from looking so long and steadily at the sunlit expanse.

When the wrestlers left the arena, hidden drums rum-

bled—throbbed out a tuneless miserere. Cymbals clashed metallically. A discordant blast of the trumpets whipped the air and a lama wearing a frightful mask with yak-horns upon it and tiger-skins flapping over his yellow robes moved toward the proscenium. He held a skull-bowl above him. Suddenly he paused and dashed its contents to the flagging, where it spread in an ugly crimson pool. Another burst of trumpets accompanied this.

"It is the Dance of the Gods," Na-chung told Trent.

A faint light showed itself in the councillor's eyes. Trent saw the same glow in the eyes of those around him—a glimmer of fanatical zeal.

The white-robed lamas danced into the center of the arena; whirled about, making strange signs; swayed to the monotonous *boom-booming* of the drums. The priests garbed as ancient warriors joined in, their nasturtium-hued mantles and golden harness aquiver like sinuous flames. As the dance continued, pilgrims frequently leaped up and prostrated themselves, intoxicated with a mystical vintage. Even Trent was not immune to infection. The drums throbbed against his heart and temples; throbbed and throbbed, until they seemed the pulse of a dull delirium.

The Dance of the Gods was interminably long and, after a while, lost its hypnotic power over Trent. The sun, a globe of angry red, was rapidly spinning into the west and a blood-shot sky flamed above the arena when the evil spirits were exorcized—for that, Na-chung explained, was the story told by the performance—and the

dancers melted into the throngs of priests on either side of the proscenium.

"Now comes the Archery Contest," announced the councillor, a repressed gleam in his eyes. "It is the great event of the celebration—a demonstration of justice."

Even as he spoke, trumpets were blown. From behind the yak-hair curtains emerged a small body of men in golden chain-mail and helmets. (The armor and headgear interested Trent. Here were relics of the ancients—of Srong-tsan-gambo and the early Tibetan kings.) The rays of the sun reflected a dull radiance in the meshes of their armor; sent needles of fire weaving along the contours of gilded bows and quivers; glittered in blood-red and gold upon polished helmets.

"They belong to the guard of his Transparency the Governor," said Na-chung.

The archers lifted their bows in salute to the Living God. A visible ripple of admiration passed around the amphitheater. Heads were strained forward, eyes focussed upon the mailed bowmen, who aligned themselves on the right side of the arena—facing the black stakes. There was something pregnant and potent in their movements. . . . .

From a gateway opposite the archers rode a double file of soldiers. Between them walked a line of men in dun-colored garments. As Trent saw that they were manacled a frightful suspicion fastened upon him. With dreadful suddenness the purpose of the stakes became apparent. . . . .

The bowmen stood motionless; only their chain-mail seemed possessed of life. It glittered and crawled with scaly scintillations, like the corrugated armor of a dragon.

At the stakes the soldiers drew up; dismounted. One of the manacled men screamed and gibbered as he was being bound—sounds that were like nothing human. Trent turned to Na-chung. The Englishman's face showed no emotion, but his jaw was thrust forward at an ugly angle.

The councillor smiled grimly.

"Their tongues are slit," he informed Trent; then, with a wave of his hand, he added: "Political offenders."

Trent, his features cast in a mold that for sheer inscrutability would have rivalled that of the stoniest idol, turned away—and an instant later he felt a warm breath upon his ear and heard Na-chung's suave voice.

"Thus the Governor punishes treason. Look! There is his Transparency now."

A vermilion-lacquered sedan-chair, borne on the shoulders of four guards, moved through a gateway close to the archers; was placed on the ground at the end of their stances. The official, visible only as a crimson blot in the interior, did not rise, but watched the proceedings from his seat.

Trent's eyes were drawn back irresistibly to the stakes where the prisoners were being bound, manacled wrists above their heads. Silence wrapped the amphitheater about, like tight swathing. To the Englishman, there

was a terrible significance in the undernote of red that the late afternoon introduced into the scene: the five bars of the blood-red sunset quivering above the arena and reflecting upon the gilded proscenium, the deep magenta of the lamas' robes, and the red-gold glint on harness and naked metal.

At a signal the archers advanced several paces. Bowstrings were tested; arrows drawn from quivers.

A shudder, half of awful ecstasy, half of horror, swept the amphitheater, like wind rippling the surface of the sea.

Trent, a nausea spreading from the pit of his stomach to his throat, saw Sâkya-mûni lift one hand. His lips pressed into a line; otherwise, his immobility was unbroken.

Another shiver swept the amphitheater.

Sâkya-mûni's hand dropped.

The archers flexed their bows; clapped their heels together; stood erect. Gutstrings snapped rigid between their nocks. . . . . The *whizz-zz-zz* of the arrows seemed to unleash the tension. A hysterical cheer wavered up from the multitude. The manacled figures sagged, hung, drenched in the flaming red of the sunset.

Trent relaxed—but the nausea remained, a dull horror that he could almost taste.

Sâkya-mûni rose, as did the multitude. A low chant began, a weird, droning incantation. The mailed executioners marched out of the arena, followed by the Governor's vermilion-lacquered sedan-chair. The masked lamas and those in harness and flame-colored man-

tles filed toward the stairway. Lictors and acolytes descended from the proscenium; the secular lords and cardinals; the Living Buddha and his attendant Grand Lamas. . . . . Slowly they traversed the yellow carpet, slowly they mounted the steps and vanished behind the yak-hair curtains. The red monks herded together on either side of the platform formed human rivulets that surged into the arena. The onlookers left their seats.

The Festival of the Gods was over.

4

Trent and Na-chung moved up the incline, sifting through the swarm. On the gallery, at the portal of the monastery, Trent looked back. Dusk was creeping into the inflamed sky and gray motes subdued the crimson reflection. Over the heads of the people he saw the arena—saw the sagging figures starkly outlined upon the white wall.

Then he plunged into the doorway, behind Na-chung.

As they re-traveled the labyrinth of corridors and courts, there hung before Trent a picture of the arena as he last looked upon it—a grim etching. He had seen men slaughtered in recognized warfare, had seen prisoners executed, but this— There was something monstrous, something inexplicably hideous, about it. His failure to understand the uncanny impression only sharpened the horror. "Their tongues are slit—" Na-chung's words were written as with steel upon his brain. When men's tongues are slit it is obviously for the pur-

pose of preventing speech. What did those wretches know? "Political offenders," the councillor had said .... yet ....

So ran his thoughts as they emerged at length on the other side of Lhakang-gompa. Night was swiftly gathering, and a familiar vermilion-lacquered sedan-chair swam in the dusk of the courtyard near the gate. As Trent drew nearer, a figure in long robes stepped out. He saw the pale blot of the Governor's face.

"Ah! It is his Transparency!" exclaimed Na-chung. "He is waiting for us."

The Governor stood motionless by his sedan-chair. Not until they were within three yards of him did he stir—and as he took a step, Trent experienced a shock that was not unlike a physical blow. But his poise did not desert him; he only drew a swift breath, which he doubted if the Governor heard, and a slight smile settled over his features—as though he had known from the very first that it was Hsien Sgam who rode in the vermilion-lacquered sedan-chair and this meeting was no more than expected, even anticipated.

"Hsien Sgam," he said, still smiling.

The Mongol—he, too, was smiling—bowed. His slender, almost feminine hands gleamed sharply-cut in the twilight.

"By that name you first knew me," he replied in the quiet, reserved voice that Trent remembered so well—a voice that chose each word with extreme care. "So, my friend, continue to know me as that."

He wore a dark silk-brocade garment; it looked crimson in the dusk. The facings were goldcloth, shining dully, and a hat with upcurling brim surmounted his pale bronze features. One of those curious, vagrant questions came to Trent as he looked at the Mongol. Was this the flannel-clad fellow-passenger of the *Manchester,* he who had talked of revolutions, of Western vices and morals? . . . . Queer . . . . There was little of incongruity about him now, here in his native setting; only the eyes and face—eyes of Lucifer and face of Buddha, Anomalous, unexplainable, almost—Trent hesitated at using the term, even in thought; yet why not?—almost monstrous.

"I am pleased to welcome you to Shingtse-lunpo," Hsein Sgam announced. "I regretted very much"—here the sensitive lips quivered in a quick smile—"that you became impatient and left the joss-house, that night in Rangoon. It was unpardonable of me to have kept you waiting, yet unavoidable. I hope to do here what I intended to do there—discuss certain matters with which you are only partly acquainted." Then, after a pause, "I trust you find your quarters comfortable?"

Trent answered with a single word.

"I am delighted to have you accept my hospitality," resumed the Mongol. "There are many—er—things we must discuss, but I would indeed be rude if I suggested that we take up those matters so soon after your fatiguing journey. Perhaps you will do me the honor of

calling at my residence to-morrow night? . . . . I shall send my estimable chief councillor, Na-chung, to—er—fetch you, as they say in your country."

And he did a most Western thing; he extended his hand. Trent accepted it, because he had no choice. For some inexplicable reason he felt a sudden loathing. In that instant the Mongol seemed, mentally, as misshapen as his limb. It was like a swift glimpse behind the serene Buddha-like face, and his touch was a tangible reminder that Hsien Sgam—Hsien Sgam of the slender hands and sensitive lips—was responsible for the slaughter that Trent only a short while before had witnessed. "Thus the Governor punishes treason," Na-chung had said.

The Mongol spoke, almost with clairvoyance.

"Doubtless you found in the ceremonies this afternoon a—er—slight unpleasantness; that is, it would be unpleasant to an Anglo-Saxon." He smiled. "Public executions, we of Shingtse-lunpo find, are necessary to bring forcibly to the people the supremacy of the State, and"—the baffling eyes were more inscrutable than ever—"as an example to those who contemplate—shall I say, *indiscretions?*"

Still smiling, Hsien Sgam limped to the sedan-chair. He entered, without another glance at Trent, and was borne away on the shoulders of the guards.

"Come," said Na-chung. "My men are waiting outside the gate."

Back through the narrow, crowded streets they rode—streets that were as chaotic as Trent's brain. The

discovery that Hsien Sgam was Governor of Shingtse-lunpo (and, quite evidently, one of the Order of the Falcon) swung his main danger from Sarojini Nanjee to the Mongol—or rather, left him between the two perils. Of the pair, he imagined he could expect more mercy from the woman. If she and the Mongol were in league, that doubly jeopardized his position; but if they were opposing forces. . . . Well, frequently the third party profits by the rivalry of the other two. What puzzled him most was why Hsien Sgam had tried to kill him in Rangoon, if he believed him Tavernake, the jeweler. And Trent did not doubt for an instant, now, that the Mongol was the instigator of the bullet that Kerth had intercepted. A warm thrill of assurance ran through him at thought of Kerth. He had one ally. More, of course, counting the muleteers and Dana Charteris; but the girl was more of a liability than an asset, a thorn in his fragile security. If she were only somewhere else. . . . . But she was not. And her presence troubled him.

Hsien Sgam, the Governor of Shingtse-lunpo. He smiled inwardly. What was the Mongol's part in the jewel mystery? He suspected that Hsien Sgam's talk of a Mongol revolution was a sheath in which his true motive in luring him to the joss-house in Rangoon lay hidden. Was—?

"By George!" he muttered, aloud.

Glancing toward Na-chung, he saw the councillor's questioning look and made an inconsequential remark, while he asked himself:

"Is Hsien Sgam . . . . but no . . . . yet . . . . well, why not? . . . . But what of Chavigny, if he is n't the Falcon?

They reached Trent's dwelling-place then. Na-chung halted at the gate, informing the Englishman that he would leave a guard.

"As your guide," he explained suavely. "You will wish to go beyond your quadrangle, and whereas your garments are a passport anywhere in the city, it is not wise for you to venture out alone—yet." He smiled. "You see, the fact that you do not speak our language, and that my people are unfortunately suspicious, might prove . . . . you understand? Therefore, I have instructed the guard to accompany you when you leave the house, as a purely precautionary measure. His Transparency the Governor also wishes me to present to you the pony which you are riding, as a slight token of his esteem."

Trent thanked him and Na-chung clattered away, followed by his retinue of soldiers.

As one of the muleteers took Trent's mount, he looked about the quadrangle for Dana Charteris.

"Where is my brother?" he asked.

The muleteer muttered a few unintelligible words.

"Where?" Trent repeated.

The Oriental looked as though he expected Trent to strike him, as he answered:

"He left the house—this morning—soon after you did, *Tajen.*"

"Alone?" He snapped out the question.

"No, *Tajen;* Kee Meng went, too."

"Where? Do you know?"—this with a frown.

"To the festival, *Tajen.*"

Trent stood motionless. The frown disappeared as he remembered that he had ridden from the amphitheatre; they, being on foot, would be later in coming.

"Send Kee Meng to me as soon as he returns," he rapped, and entered the dwelling.

When a half-hour had gone by and Dana Charteris and Kee Meng had not come, the frown returned to Trent's forehead; returned and stayed; and deepened into furrows when another thirty minutes did not bring them. He went up on the roof to smoke and to be alone; and he paced the stones, drawing nervously upon the amber stem and confessing to himself that he was alarmed.

His heart beat a swift symphony of anticipation when he heard the gate open. Without looking over the roof-wall, he hurried below. As he stepped into the quadrangle and beheld the limp figure that was being supported by two muleteers, fear sank its talons into him.

The sound of his footsteps brought the limp figure up with a visible effort. He thrust back the two men; took a step; dropped on his knees before Trent.

"*Tajen!*" whispered Kee Meng. "*Tajen,* I swear by Allah that—"

Trent gripped his shoulders. His right hand encountered moisture; he saw a stain.

"What is it?" he demanded, his muscles bound in a rigor of dreadful apprehension.

"*Tajen,* as we were coming from that—that devil dance, the brother and I. . . . We were in a street no wider than this"—painfully he lifted his hands in illustration—"and they jumped on us from behind—"

"Who did?"

"I do not know, *Tajen;* but I think they were lamas. They struck me from behind—and as I lay there I heard the brother scream—and I. . . . They stabbed me, *Tajen.* I saw black for a long while, oh, a very long while! When I woke up I was lying in the gutter. The brother—he was gone! I was hurt; but I knew you would kill me if I returned without looking—so I hunted —until I spilled my blood over the city and had none left to keep me alive. Then I came—came back!"

He sank in a huddle at Trent's feet.

"Kill me, *Tajen,*" he moaned. "The brother—how could I refuse when he told me to go with him to. . . . ? But kill me—I am not worth the—" His voice broke; he was still.

Trent bent swiftly. After a moment he stood erect.

"Carry him inside," he directed the muleteers. "It is n't a bad wound; he 's weak from loss of blood."

The two yellow men stooped and picked up the unconscious Kee Meng. As Trent entered the house behind them the putrid odor of butter-lamps assaulted him, sickened him. The blow had come with a maiming force. He felt suddenly crippled.

5

When Trent had dressed Kee Meng's wound he re-

turned to the roof, to his pipe and the stars. The spot seemed a lone haven of cleanliness, raised above the malefic atmosphere of the city. . . . . To think—to decide what to do. He told himself that over and over as he paced the stones. His hands, figuratively, were tied. There was no one to whom he dared appeal—none save Kerth, and the two of them might search for days in the labyrinth of the city without even finding a clue. Meanwhile, Dana Charteris was in danger—a danger that was more frightful because of the indefiniteness of its character. There was but one explanation for her disappearance: either Sarojini Nanjee or Hsien Sgam had discovered her sex and had taken steps to place her where she was likely to cause the least trouble . . . . and where she might prove a weapon.

He smoked on, pipe clamped between his teeth, striding the length of the housetop. The stars saw what few men had ever seen—Arnold Trent stripped of his mask, his citadel of impassivity beaten down. A great hollow infinity seemed to press upon him and quench the very breath from his lips. He came to understand a new emotion—the agony of separation. The scales of unreason weighed values, and an alien recklessness urged him to forsake the sovereign motive for his presence in Shingtse-lunpo and with one mighty effort break the bonds that held him to a discreet course. Did not duty toward flesh transcend duty toward the inanimate? . . . . Thus the lover's litany—a beautiful heresy.

But all this ache, longing, and unreason only carried him about in a circle; and from these purposeless revolu-

tions the memory of her, a continuous glow in the dimness, led him into patience, to a mastery of himself. There were lines in his face—the mellow writing of anguish. It was as though he had partaken of the eucharist of suffering and from the bitter sacrament had come quiescence.

With the first easing of the tension came a plan. It broke upon him suddenly. If Sarojini Nanjee had abducted Dana Charteris, he could only rely upon his wits to free her; but if it was Hsien Sgam— His plan was a counter-blow at the Mongol in the event he was responsible for the girl's disappearance. It was a bold play, and if he failed . . . .

As he heard a soft footfall, he swung about toward the shaft. A figure emerged—one of the muleteers.

"*Tajen*, a lama is below." he announced. "He came over the garden wall. He says he would speak with you."

"Send him up here," directed Trent.

Several minutes later a shaven skull projected itself above the black opening in the roof, and Kerth, in his lama robes, stepped out. There was something reassuring in the sight of him. A white man! That alone was a moral fire in which to forge his resolution.

Kerth listened in silence while Trent recounted what had happened and told of his plan.

"I know of a place to conceal him," Kerth announced, when Trent had concluded. "It 's an old ruin at the other end of the city; and there 's a vault, with a door that will lock. I stayed there the first few days I was

in Shingtse-lunpo. We 'll have to strike now—to-night. To-morrow morning I enter Lhakang-gompa, to serve in one of the cells." He smiled his satanic smile. "It 's my one chance to get at the source of things in the monastery."

They descended from the roof—and a few minutes afterward, when Kerth climbed over the garden wall, he was accompanied by two of Trent's muleteers. Trent stood in the shadow of the willow-thorn until their footsteps ceased, then returned to the house to wait.

He kept vigil in the quadrangle for more than an hour, restless, impatient. At the first sounds in the willow-grove, he hurried to the garden and met the two caravan-men.

"All is well, *Tajen,*" reported one of the Orientals. "The lama bade me tell you everything happened as planned and that the councillor Na-chung is hidden in the vault."

"The lama sent no other message?"

"He said he wishes you the peace of Gaudama Siddartha."

Good old Kerth, Trent thought warmly. That was his message of comfort.

"You have done well," he commended the muleteers. "To-morrow you will each receive a gift."

It was near midnight, and the stars had fled before black clouds and a drizzling rain, when Trent forced himself to lie down. Almost the instant he relaxed unconsciousness carried him into its dim cathedral, and he drank of the sleep that deadens even the pains of the dying.

CHAPTER XII

LHAKANG-GOMPA

FROM the very midst of slumber Trent was shot into consciousness. He opened his eyes to find himself submerged in darkness, and to feel another presence in the black flood. His hand went involuntarily to the revolver that he kept always within reach, and as he lifted himself upon his elbow, one hand gripping the weapon, he saw a body silhouetted upon the grayish rectangle of a window.

"*Tajen!*" whispered a voice that he recognized as that of one of the muleteers. "It is Hsiao. There is a man below. . . . He told me to be quiet and not arouse the guard . . . . He brought this for you."

A folded sheet of paper was thrust into Trent's hand. The scent of sandalwood caressed his nostrils and cleared his brain of the last tangle of drowsiness. He rose and sought his electric torch, which was in his kit-bag. Snapping on the light, he read the note. . . . . It was brief; merely instructed him to follow the bearer and was signed by Sarojini Nanjee. . . . . A glance at his watch showed him it was after two o'clock.

"Where is he? In the quadrangle?" Trent queried.

"Yes, *Tajen.*"

"I 'll be there directly."

Trent strapped his revolver to his thigh; procured a certain object from his pack; went below.

A thin, misting rain was falling, and the wind swept down in cold legions from the snows of the North. It was a night to kindle icy flame in the marrow. Gray gloom lay like a ghoulish lacquer upon the world, and dogs were howling somewhere in the city.

Sarojini's messenger was a thin-featured Tibetan with long hair. He extended a dark bundle to Trent and muttered something in his own tongue.

"He says for you to put those on, *Tajen*," translated the muleteer.

Unrolling the bundle, Trent saw a long toga and a pair of heavy Tibetan boots. The latter he pulled on with some difficulty, then threw the toga about his shoulders.

The long-haired messenger touched his arm, motioning toward the garden. Hsiao, the muleteer, accompanied them to the wall, where he lent Trent his aid in reaching the top. Outside, the Englishman found himself in a narrow lane that opened upon the street.

Through ghostly highways they moved. Now and then a dog snarled viciously and slunk away as the Tibetan kicked at him. They traveled along constricted streets, some graduated into steps, and past silent, white-washed houses that loomed spectral in the night. These ramifications led them to a stone bridge and a roadway between tall bamboo and the black blur of trees. Trent could see the city's walls now, beyond rounded clumps of bushes. From this clustered vegeta-

tion rose a large temple-like edifice whose dome shone dully through the drizzle.

A lane branched off from the main road and took them to the gates of the temple-like building. First, a courtyard, then an imposing doorway. Within, it was damp and cold. Butter-lamps made a feeble attempt to disperse rebellious shadows. Monster shapes, which Trent perceived to be idols, glowed sullenly in the semi-dark.

A hall with red-lacquered pillars led to a massive portal that was opened by a brass ring. It swung back, to release the odor of incense and rancid butter and to admit Trent and the Tibetan into a vast space that evidently was a temple. Butter-lamps hiccoughed and threw their reflections upon brazen images and old armor. In the remote end a dull mass of gold kindled in the temple-dusk, a form that took on the shape of a huge idol—and from beneath the shining god came a figure of familiar proportions.

"Greetings, man of many faces!" said Sarojini Nan-jee in her sweet voice, a voice that rang like the notes of a gong in the ponderous silence of the temple.

Trent glimpsed behind her a man in claret-colored vestments. The face was strongly reminiscent of one he had recently seen, and after a few seconds recognition flashed into him. He was the one whom Na-chung had pointed out in the amphitheater as the Great Magician of Shingtse-lunpo. The woman, seeing Trent's look and misunderstanding it, announced:

"He knows only Tibetan and Hindustani; that is why I speak English." Then she added, "He is the third most powerful man in Shingtse-lunpo."

Trent casually took in Sarojini Nanjee's manner of dress—casually, because he did not wish to appear particularly interested. She wore a long maroon garment such as Tibetan women wear; only the lines were not bulky, but adapted themselves to the purpose of revealing the contours of her figure. Her skin was darkened by a stain—skin that was quite unlike that of the women of Shingtse-lunpo in that it was smooth and without a coat of dust and grease. A silver aureole rose behind her black hair, which was parted after the Tibetan fashion. A flame, as of black opals, danced and flashed in her eyes as she smiled at him.

"I have not sent for you before," she told him, "because it would have been indiscreet. Too, we could have done nothing until now. I did not know of your arrival until many hours after you reached the city. I—"

"You expected my muleteers to report my presence," he put in, smiling.

She smiled, too, although he could see she was not pleased.

"Yes. Where are they?"

"I did n't fancy being spied upon night and day," he replied, "so I left them at Tali-fang."

"Do you realize that was disobeying me?"

"You did n't forbid changing servants." After a

pause he went on, "Yet my precautions were useless, for I daresay by now you know everything that happened since I left Tali-fang."

She looked at him quizzically. (And he did not know whether the expression was genuine or not.)

"What do you mean?"

"One of my men failed to put in his appearance last night. I naturally surmised"—this rather drily—"that you detained him to find out what he knew."

He was watching her closely, and again that quizzical expression clouded her eyes. After a moment she smiled queerly.

"You accuse me of crude tactics," she said; then switched off with: "But tell me, what have you learned since your arrival?"

He answered discreetly. "I attended the festival to-day."

She nodded. "I saw you. I was in the Governor's stall. Because of his vigilance I dared not communicate with you before this. He watches me as a hawk watches its prey." (Trent wondered if the word "hawk" had any significance.) "But while the bird sleeps, the cobra goes about its business. . . . . You have not yet told me what you learned."

After some deliberation he said:

"I know of Sâkya-mûni; and I know that monks from Shingtse-lunpo accompanied the abbot who pilgrimaged to Gaya."

A second time she nodded. "Do you know what occurred at Gaya?"

Trent's heart was beating swiftly as he countered:

"You should know; you were there at the time."

And his heart beat swifter as she whipped back:

"Who told you that?"

Trent was thrusting boldly. He meant to beat down all guards, to win or lose. The suspense, the groping in the dark, was consuming his nerve-tissues.

"Hsien Sgam," he lied.

A typhoon of rage flashed across her beautiful face. It spent itself quickly. She opened her lips; closed them; and after a space said quite calmly:

"Why did Hsien Sgam tell you that?"

Trent shrugged. "How do I know?"

She gestured impatiently. "What question did you ask that caused him to tell that?"

Having gone so far, Trent ventured a step further.

"Captain Manlove, who shared my bungalow at Gaya, was murdered the night the monks were there. I asked him if he could explain it."

A queer, cold expression settled upon Sarojini Nanjee's face. Only her eyes were warm: they burned like melted opals. She smiled—a rather terrible smile.

"I had not heard that before, that your friend was murdered," she announced. "Why did not you tell me?"

"Why should I?"

Her eyes searched his face; encountered that barrier of impassivity.

"You say you suspected the monks?"

"Not until I reached Shingtse-lunpo."

A pause before she pursued:

"But why, even then, did you suspect them? What motive—"

"I 'm at loss for a motive," he cut in quietly. "I don't know what to think, for, you see, I found this" —he drew from under his robe a glittering object— "in his, in Captain Manlove's, hand."

He opened the silver-chased pendant and extended it to her. She glanced at the name graven within; looked up at him. The lids sank over her eyes—to cover surprise, he imagined.

"But why," she queried, "did not you tell me of this before?"

"Because if you lied to me once, I thought it likely you 'd lie a second time. You swore that Chavigny had nothing to do with the Order—yet—" He motioned toward the piece of coral.

Her eyes burned with a steady flame.

"I spoke the truth!" she declared. "Chavigny has nothing to do with the Order, has had nothing to do with it since several days before your Captain Manlove was murdered. Oh, I know what you think—that I am lying now! But, even as I spoke the truth then, I speak it now! Chavigny is dead—was dead before your friend was killed!"

Trent took the pendant, avoiding her eyes. It was one of his idiosyncrasies not to look at a person whom he believed lying to him.

"Chavigny was intrusted with certain work at Indore," she continued, "but he ran amuck; tried to steal

the Pearl Scarf for himself and substituted an imitation. A blundering Secret Service agent, who had followed Chavigny from Calcutta, interfered. I am not aware of the exact circumstances, but this Secret Service agent came into possession of the real Pearl Scarf. The Order allowed Chavigny to go to Delhi. There the substitute was discovered—and Chavigny put out of the way. The Secret Service agent who had the real jewels was in Delhi, where he had tracked Chavigny. I was instructed to recover the Pearl Scarf, and I sent my servant, Chandra Lal, to the hotel where the Government agent was staying. He got the pearls and—''

''And you took them to Gaya, to the lamas?'' Trent interposed.

''Did I say that?'' she retorted. ''What I did with them is no concern of yours—at present.''

''But you were at Gaya?''

''I refuse to answer that.''

''But if Chavigny was put out of the way, as you say, how do you account for this?'' he pressed on, extending the pendant.

''How does one account for the sun, the moon, the stars?'' she returned. ''No, I do not know now—but I *will* know! And you shall avenge the slaying of your friend! You shall have blood for blood! I, Sarojini Nanjee, promise that! I will learn the truth—even if I must go to the Falcon!''

Trent took that as his cue and asked:

''Who *is* the Falcon?''

She stared at him. ''Then you have not seen him?''

Trent wanted to smile. Without herself realizing it, she had told him the one thing he wished to know. He had said that he had talked with Hsien Sgam—and now she asked if he had seen the Falcon. . . . .

"No," he replied, "I have not seen him."

"You will see him, then," she said quickly, "at the proper time. Minutes are too precious to spend on explanations now. To-night I shall show you one of the secrets of Shingtse-lunpo. . . . . Come! You must meet the Great Magician.

The high priest of sorcery (whose presence they had for the while forgotten) greeted Trent cordially in Hindustani, but it was evident that he was troubled—though the fact that his lips trembled slightly may have been due to the dampness of the temple.

Sarojini Nanjee threw a robe about her shoulders and, motioning to Trent, guided him to one side of the large golden image, to a door that the Great Magician had opened. Beyond was a courtyard. It was still drizzling and low black clouds impended. A gate was pushed open by the high priest and they emerged upon a path that ended at a gate in the nearby city-walls. If there was a guard, he was discreetly out of sight.

Outside was a low embankment, then the dark waste of the morass that girded Shingtse-lunpo. To the west, in the thin veil of rain, was a shapeless blur that Trent imagined was Amber Bridge. The Great Magician shut the gate and led the way down the embankment. The ground was not soggy, as Trent expected, and,

straining his eyes, he saw the reason. They were following a barely visible road through the rushes.

Toward the shapeless blur they moved. As they drew nearer it became apparent that it was not Amber Bridge, but a pile of broken stone—a remnant of the old outer-fortifications—in the middle of the swamp-belt. When they reached the mass of masonry Trent saw that it was a portion of a broken wall, rising above nearly obliterated flagstones that formed the floor of what had once been a room, or a tunnel, under a mighty rampart—a wall that was hollowed and whose roof had fallen in. The passage thus formed was not more than three feet in width and ran for several yards before it ended in a *cul-de-sac*.

Into the narrow space between the walls Trent and Sarojini Nanjee followed the Great Magician. It was damp and smelled of freshly-turned earth. A few feet from the entrance the Tibetan paused and grunted a word to Sarojini. Instantly a saber of light smote the darkness, a ray from a very modern electric torch in the woman's hand. The Great Magician took the light from her, flashing it into the *cul-de-sac* and upon a small stone stairway that plunged into grim depths.

Down into the bowels of the earth it carried them, into a rectangular crypt. Blocks of masonry had been torn away from one side of the wall and an irregular aperture gaped blackly. Trent observed that the stones had not been removed recently, for they were wedged in mud and grown with fungi.

Through the rent in the crypt they passed, entering a tunnel that bored downward at a gradual incline. The torchlight wavered upon damp, ancient walls; upon several inches of water in the bottom of the passage. Cold, earthy odors fouled the air. Before they had proceeded far, loose rocks rattled underfoot, and Trent, glancing down, saw that he was treading upon chips and small particles of stone. White dust streaked the muddy water. This prepared him for the pile of shattered rock that appeared suddenly ahead, heaped at one side of a crude doorway. All of which attested to the fact that the passage had at one time been sealed, but very recently opened—and by men who were not masons.

The tunnel continued its gradual downward course for what Trent calculated was at least a mile. If he judged aright they must be somewhere near the middle of the city. Suddenly the subterranean corridor made a series of turns, then sloped upward, running straight after that and bringing them at length into a crypt similar to the one beneath the swamp-ruins. The smell of oil hung in the air, and Trent identified it with the iron-bound door at one side. He was surprised to see that its lock was very modern. (From some shop in Gyang-tse or Darjeeling—thus he conjectured irrelevantly.) The Great Magician fumbled at the formidable portal, and, following a grating noise, it swung out soundlessly on well-oiled hinges. Yellow light impinged upon the darkness of a stairway, on the bottom step of which rested a brass lamp.

The priest lighted the lamp, and Sarojini Nanjee, slipping her hand into Trent's, led the Englishman through the door and up the stairway. Looking back, Trent saw the Great Magician sink cross-legged upon the floor; then the picture was shut out as they climbed higher into gloom. Near the top Sarojini halted and directed the light upward. It swept a square of stone at the very head of the stairs; the lines where it fitted into place were scarcely visible.

"You will have to lift the stone," Sarojini told him, stepping aside.

He mounted the few remaining stairs and stooped in the meager space at the top, pressing hands and shoulders against the square of stone. Warm blood rushed into his stained cheeks as he slowly drew erect, lifting the stone from place and letting it fall noisily upon the floor above. The space into which the rock fitted was perhaps three yards around, widening out at the top. Trent's head and shoulders projected from the aperture into blackness that was more intense because of the light from which he had emerged.

"Pull yourself up," directed Sarojini. "Then I will give you the light."

He drew himself out of the stairway with little difficulty, clambering to his knees on the stone floor above and leaning back to receive the pocket-lamp. As he lifted the light he gained an impression of vastness and gloom and many indistinguishable objects. Placing the torch on the floor beside him, he grasped Sarojini's hands and pulled her through the small space—and she

lingered uncomfortably long in his arms, whether by chance or otherwise, he could only wonder.

He recovered the torchlight, and the woman took it from him. The ray cleaved through shadows and stamped a bar of yellow upon a row of oblong wooden boxes; traveled across more boxes (the latter, Trent observed, the length of ordinary rifles) and brought into glowing prominence the slender objects that hung upon the walls. With a quickening of his heart-beat Trent guessed where they were—for the glowing things were swords and lances. Piles of armor shone with a repressed gleam on the floor, and numerous bright shapes outside the intimate radiance of the light resolved into jeweled pistols such as he had seen in the possession of soldiers of the Golden Army. But with the boxes he was mainly concerned; their blank sides intrigued him and challenged his fancy.

"We are in the Armory," said Sarojini Nanjee, "under the center of Lhakang-gompa—not beneath the ground, as you would imagine, but just below the surface of the rocky eminence where the building stands."

She let the light rove about the Armory, which was vast and stretched on four sides into black obscurity. A series of arches and pillars deepened the mystery; armor and various types of weapons kindled dully against a background of gloom. There were more wooden boxes in remote corners, innumerable piles of them.

"What do they contain?" he inquired, indicating the many boxes.

As he expected, she lied.

"How should I know? Armor, I fancy. Yonder"—with a gesture—"is the entrance from the monastery. Soldiers guard the other side of the door. . . . Come!"

As she led off under the arches and along an aisle between the boxes, Trent asked himself why stores of explosives and ammunition were hidden beneath a Tibetan monastery. Perhaps, after all, there was something to Hsien Sgam's revolution. . . . .

An arched doorway admitted them to a corridor lined with gleaming idols. Hideous frescoes were painted upon long panels between the images, and at the end was a massive crimson-stained door. Before one of the panels Sarojini stopped. The painting was monstrous and pictured a three-eyed god standing in the midst of skulls and human entrails—a god that Trent recognized with a start as the one whose image was wrought on the coral symbol of the Order of the Falcon. At regular intervals on the panel were four brass rings, each having a long scarlet tassel attached to it.

Sarojini thrust the torch into Trent's hand and caught one of the brass rings. She twisted it and tugged, and the panel yielded, sliding to one side and disclosing a dark cavity in the wall. The woman stepped in first, Trent following. The recess was not more than fifty feet in diameter—a square space with frescoed walls. Opposite the entrance, and upon a lacquered pedestal, was a silver image of Janesseron, the Three-eyed God of Thunder—and his trio of narrow little orbs looked down upon the several chests that were pushed against the walls of the small room.

"You remember," began Sarojini, "that you were told you would reach enlightenment by gradations? . . . . Now you stand upon the next to the last terrace."

With that she moved to one of the chests; lifted the lid; turned to Trent.

"Come closer," she commanded.

He did. And his eyes met the glitter of gems. And he caught his breath, for he knew he stood in the midst of the jewels for which he had penetrated into the forbidden arcanum of Asia.

"Look," directed the woman, indicating a card attached to the inside of the small chest. "It is written in Hindustani. See: H. H. Tukaji Rao Holkar III, Bahadur, Maharajah of Indore!"

There was a cool, tinkling sound as she drew from the chest a scarf of pearls—tiny lustrous spheres that shone like miniature moons.

"For these," she said, "André Chavigny died."

In the dimness, above the ray of the pocket-lamp, their eyes met, his expressionless, hers again like black opals. He heard her quick breathing—felt, as did she, the contagion of the jewels. . . . . In her hands she held a fortune. Vaguely, irrelevantly, he tried to recall the sum at which the pearls of Indore were appraised; instead, wondered why she wished him to believe Chavigny out of the game.

"Hsien Sgam was the first to show me where the jewels were hidden," she resumed. "But he did not take me through the tunnel." Again the cool, musical tinkle as she dropped the pearls into the chest. "We came

from the corridors above the Armory. The possibility of ever making away with the jewels seemed very meager—until I found out that there was a tunnel leading from a point somewhere outside the city up into the vaults of Lhakang-gompa. I learned it from a young layman who was loose of tongue and eager for *tengas*—learned also that there had been trouble between Sâkya-mûni and the Great Magician and that the Living Buddha was threatening to depose his chief sorcerer. So I went to the Great Magician . . . .'' She shrugged. ''The lock is easy to him who knows the combination; thus with men . . . . The tunnel had been sealed; but after the sorcerer's men had worked for five nights that obstacle was removed. The passage was completely opened yesterday. The fool—the magician—thinks he will fly with us when we leave and receive a portion of the jewels! But he will never pass the walls of Shingtse-lunpo after to-night, nor will he interfere with my plans!''

Before Trent could ask the question that came to the end of his tongue Sarojini Nanjee threw back the lid of the largest of the chests, and the shimmer and flare of gems disconnected thought from speech.

''The Gaekwar of Baroda,'' announced the woman, pointing to the card on the inside of the lid. ''This is the Star of the Deccan.''

She clasped a necklace of diamonds about her throat, and the stones trembled against her skin like spiders of fire.

''Do not they look well about my neck?'' she asked

in a repressed voice, a voice that shook. Then she laughed, but he did not like the symptoms that underlay it. He gripped himself. The muscles of his throat stood out, and there was about him the air of a man preparing to do battle.

Sarojini Nanjee returned the diamonds to the chest. Gems rattled. She lifted what seemed a fabric of the spun brilliance of the universe—and a flame swept into Trent's brain. This amazing dazzle, as of cascading stars, was born of a rug made entirely of pearls, with central and corner figures of diamonds; a rug that coruscated and blazed as though its weaver had threaded the shuttle with flame and woven a carpet for the gods; a rug whose gems were multi-hued little serpents that coiled about Trent's brain and sank their fangs into his reason.

The carpet slipped from Sarojini Nanjee's hands and lay in a quivering heap on the edge of the chest. The fire in her eyes matched that of the rug.

"Millions!" she murmured in a husky voice. "Millions!"

. . . . As one in a dream, Trent saw her hands stretch out to him; felt them on his arms. The touch sent a shock of warning through his frame. Involuntarily he stiffened and took a step backward—but the perfume of her hair, the scent of bruised sandalwood, was in his nostrils and on his lips and face, like the fragrant breath of the sirocco . . . . and the hot mystery of her eyes challenged him to take the caress that her lips offered. (Of the earth always, this Sarojini Nanjee, with earth's

gifts for men.) A deadly languor locked about him. He was in some fever-breeding jungle, and she was there, this golden woman, very close to him. . . .

A small incident saved him from Attila's fate.

There came a sound, a gentle rattle and patter, like cool rain upon his thirsty thoughts. Something seemed to snap in his brain, and he moved back a pace—and out of the danger zone. He perceived, then, that the jewel-carpet had slipped from the chest to the floor, thus rescuing him from the very web that it had contrived.

Sarojini, too, drew back. Chagrin smothered the fire from her eyes. Concupiscence in him—her chief weapon—was broken. She saw by the set of his features that control had returned, and knew that having once been so close to defeat, he would be thrice as wary as before. She had lost in this first campaign. She smiled cynically.

"You were always a fool, Arnold," she told him. "Another moment and I might have said that to the north, across Mongolia, lies Russia . . . . and there, the portals of the world . . . . you and I . . . . " She smiled again, and there was a trace of bitterness in it. "Oh, yes, I can forget Jehelumpore—can forgive. Said I not that I am the Swaying Cobra, that I dance for those I love, but have only venom for those I hate? Now, Arnold, you are your old Anglo-Saxon self again—oh, you English, with your 'sense of honor'—and to-night you will start for India and your humdrum life. Yes, we will leave Shingtse-lunpo to-night, with these" —she made a gesture—" and for a while you will be a

hero—and then—" She broke off, still smiling; shrugged. "Then, in the years that follow, you will often remember that night in Tibet when the Swaying Cobra might have offered you the wealth of an empire . . . . and perhaps you will regret your Anglo-Saxon sentimentalism."

Then she turned and placed in the chest the carpet whose only gift to men, down through the years, was a dream of crime. Trent drew one hand across his moist forehead, as though to wipe away the obfuscations of a nightmare. The recollection of his weakness came as a hot accusation. His lips had touched the cup of delirium, and of that shuddering moment there remained but the memory—gray anti-climax.

"We dare not remain here longer," announced Sarojini. "The Great Magician is a coward, and if we are too long we shall find him chattering like the ape that he is. I will give you your instructions now. Listen well. To-night—it must be near dawn now—I shall have a pack-train ready, and in barley sacks, upon the animals, will be the jewels. You will send your caravan out of the city beforehand, with instructions to wait on the road a mile beyond Amber Bridge. Meanwhile, at eleven o'clock—remember, eleven—a man will be at your house and will guide you to the gate by which we left the city this morning, the Great Magician's Gate. There I will meet you.

"The gems will not be missed until the following day—and I have taken precautions to cover our trail. Yesterday a man left with a caravan of yaks, and several

miles beyond the *tchorten* outpost he is waiting. There we will change pack-animals. He will go north, along the road to Mongolia, with the ponies and mules; while we will travel south, with the yaks. The soldiers at the outpost will describe us as having been on mules, and our pursuers will follow the tracks of the horses and mules. When they discover their mistake we will be near the border of India—for we shall travel along the Himalayas to Gyangtse. There the District Agent will protect us."

"Can my muleteers leave Shingtse-lunpo without passports?" Trent questioned.

She nodded. "A passport is necessary only when one wishes to enter; it is not required at all of Tibetans. . . . . Come, we must go."

They left the recess in the wall, closed the panel and returned to the vast, dim Armory. Again the blank sides of the boxes intrigued Trent. Sarojini, carrying the flashlight, preceded him through the aperture in the floor and stood on the stair, directing the ray up while he fitted the stone into place. Then they descended into the crypt.

The Great Magician was waiting as they had left him—sitting cross-legged on the floor. Extinguishing the lamp, he placed it upon the bottom step and locked the door.

Back through the tunnel, with its cold, earthy odors, they went; reached the crypt in the swamp; ascended into the ruins. It was still dark. The rain had stopped, but a lingering moisture saturated the cold air.

Under the gray barren sky they crossed the marsh and entered the city. The Tibetan who guided Trent to the Great Magician's temple was waiting just within the gate, and there the Englishman parted with Sarojini Nanjee.

"This man will come for you to-night," she whispered in English. "Be ready. To-night we win or lose, Arnold—and if we lose, Hsien Sgam will have us put to death as he did those mute fools who were executed in the amphitheater yesterday!"

She smiled—a smile that might have been a promise or a threat—and hurried away with the Great Magician.

Trent moved off behind his guide. Once more they traveled the silent, ghostly streets where only snarling curs were astir. The Tibetan uttered never a word—not even when he left. At Trent's house he helped the Englishman over the wall, then slunk toward the mouth of the lane.

The muleteers were asleep in the quadrangle, but Trent's footsteps aroused them. He instructed Hsiao to make a fire. Kee Meng, who lay upon a yak-hair robe by the main entrance, told him he had been sleeping well, that there was little pain and he could stand without ill effects.

As Trent dried his clothing by the fire, scenes of the past few hours conjured themselves in the darkness beyond the flames. Three things he had learned; three things he had yet to learn. He knew where the jewels were hidden; knew that Sarojini Nanjee and Hsien Sgam were not allied (although her connection with the

Mongol puzzled him); knew the woman could tell him something about the murder of Manlove (for she was in Gaya the night he was killed). But the mystery of Chavigny was yet unsolved, as was the mystery of Manlove's death and the mystery of Dana Charteris' disappearance. He did not altogether trust Sarojini; the incident of the rug (flame to the memory) was a hint of some purpose of her own. Furthermore, her plan was too simple to be convincing. . . . . And how much there was to be accomplished before eleven o'clock! He had one remaining card to play. And he would not wait for Hsien Sgam to send for him; he would seek him out, force his hand.

With this purpose established in his mind, he instructed the muleteers to call him three hours after sunrise and went to his room. He was weary—body and soul.

When he fell asleep, dawn was beginning to bleed the veins of the East.

CHAPTER XIII

FALCON'S NEST

IT seemed to Trent that he had scarcely closed his eyes before a touch awakened him. Sunlight floated through the window in a cloud of gold, and Hsiao, the muleteer, stood beside his cot. When he rose he felt stiff and empty of vitality; the vampire of utter exhaustion had drained him while he slept. A groove was worn into his brain, a groove into which all thoughts fell unresistingly.

It was nearly nine o'clock, and a few minutes later when he went below he found Kee Meng bending over a fire, boiling water for his tea.

"I thought I told you not to move about," he said sternly to the Mussulman.

Kee Meng tapped his wound. "See, it is well now, *Tajen!*" Then he inclined his head toward the soldier who lounged in the gateway. "I was talking to him a while ago, *Tajen*, and he says there is great excitement at the house of the councillor, Na-chung, because"—Kee Meng winked—"because Na-chung disappeared last night and they fear he has been murdered and his body thrown to the dogs and vultures! He says they are searching the city for the councillor."

Trent did not smile. In his eyes was an absent look,

as though his brain followed a derelict idea. Presently he asked:

"I 've had no message from the lama?"

"No, *Tajen.*"

Trent spent a restless three hours. He went up on the roof and smoked and thought. There was something pregnant and repressed in the calm blue sky, in the gleam of Lhakang-gompa's golden roofs, and in the shimmer and glare of the whitewashed city. He waited until noon, hoping he would hear from Kerth; but no message came, and, vaguely troubled, he descended from the roof. He procured his revolver; slipped it under his orange-yellow robe. Then he sought Kee Meng, who was in the quadrangle.

"I am going to the Governor's house," he told the muleteer. "As soon as the soldier and I have gone, get our packs together and you and the men go to the place where Hsiao and Kang went last night. Stay there, in hiding, until you hear from me. Under no circumstances leave. Deliver the—the thing that is hidden in the cellar only in my presence or upon a written order from me."

"But, *Tajen,*" objected Kee Meng, "do you go alone?"

Trent nodded. "Alone."

An expression of genuine concern came into the Mussulman's oblique eyes.

"This is an evil city, *Tajen;* the Governor is an evil man. It was he who commanded the archers yesterday. And the brother—what of the brother, *Tajen?*"

"I am going now to find him." Then he called Hsiao. "Tell the soldier I wish to go to the Governor's house," he directed. "Then bring my horse."

Fifteen minutes later Trent and the soldier rode out of the quadrangle and toward Lhakang-gompa.

They skirted the outer walls of the monastery and followed a wide street through a part of the city that was unfamiliar to Trent. The Governor's residence was at the very end, surrounded by a garden and roofed with dazzling blue tiles. A soldier admitted them into the courtyard, where they waited until a man who, Trent imagined, was a chamberlain came out and spoke in Tibetan to the soldier. Then the former went inside. He reappeared a moment later and beckoned to Trent. The Englishman dismounted; left his pony with the soldier; followed the chamberlain into the dwelling.

He was conducted along a hall that was dark after the bright sunlight. Curtains parted, swished behind him. As his vision became better regulated to the dimness he saw a great door, stained cardinal-red. This was opened by the chamberlain, who stood aside for him to enter. . . . . The door closed gently behind him.

He was in a room with scarlet-lacquered walls and frescoes like those in the Armory. The silken hangings, too, were scarlet, and a single window with an iron grill allowed the sunshine to filter through in golden rain. Facing him was a silver image of Janesseron, the Three-eyed God of Thunder; and beneath the idol, at a Burmese teakwood table that struck a jarring note in the

otherwise Tibetan room, and in a teakwood chair that was equally as incongruous, sat his Transparency Hsien Sgam, the Governor of Shingtse-lunpo.

The Mongol rose an instant after Trent entered and limped forward, his hand extended. Realizing it would be unwise to offend Hsien Sgam at the outset, the Englishman accepted the proffered hand.

"I am delighted to see you,"—Hsien Sgam paused deliberately and smiled—"Mr. Tavernake." And he added: "We may converse without fear of being overheard; there are no eavesdroppers in my house. Will you sit down? I was unprepared for this visit, as I did not expect to receive you until to-night, when I hoped to have you dine with me—which I still hope you will do. . . . . I trust no trouble brings you?"

Trent, not surprised by the reception (for east of Suez a dagger lurks beneath silk), carefully chose his words before he gave tongue to them.

"I 've come to report a loss," he announced, looking directly at Hsien Sgam.

"Ah!" The Mongol uttered the expletive softly.

A long pause followed, each man waiting for the other to resume. Hsien Sgam took the initiative.

"I am desolated to learn that you have suffered a loss, though of what nature I am not yet aware. We—er—find it very difficult to control thievery in the city. May I inquire what you lost?"

The bronze face was as expressionless as that of the Buddha it so resembled. Nor was Trent's face any less

impassive. It was as though the two had drawn armor about them.

"Last night," said the Englishman, "one of my muleteers disappeared."

"Ah!" Again the soft expletive. "Is that strange —er—Mr. Tavernake? Is it not likely that he deserted?"

Trent went on:

"He was attacked while returning from the festival with another muleteer. The latter was wounded in the struggle, knocked unconscious; and when he awakened his companion was gone. Since then I have n't seen nor heard of the missing muleteer."

A smile settled upon Hsien Sgam's beautiful face. Once more Trent caught the illusion: eyes of Lucifer, face of Buddha.

"Be assured, Mr. Tavernake, I shall do all in my limited power to learn whither your—er—*muleteer* has been spirited."

Trent rested one hand upon his hip, touching the steel beneath the robe.

"I understand," he began, "that last evening your chief councillor, Na-chung, who was kind enough to accompany me to the ceremonies yesterday, was missed from his home."

Hsien Sgam limped back to his table; sat down; folded his hands upon the surface. The close-cropped head rose, almost as a deformity, from the dark crimson robe. In that instant he was both sinister and

pathetic, threatening and pleading. Trent saw him as a figure curiously detached and aloof from human beings (the power of the man could not be denied), as mentally grotesque and misshapen as his limb.

"It *is* strange," he declared in those chosen, precise words of his, "that the two disappeared on the same night, your *muleteer* and my chief councillor. It is quite"—the slant eyes smiled—"quite coincidental." A pause. "Do I—er—strike the nail on the head, as they put it in your country, when I say that you come for a twofold purpose: to solicit my aid in finding your *muleteer,* and to inform me that you have discovered a clue that might lead to the very excellent Na-chung? In other words, you suggest a compromise: I agree to direct my efforts toward recovering your—er—lost one, if you produce the clue that will lead us to the councillor."

Another smile. Trent, too, smiled—only inwardly. There was something droll in the situation.

"Did you consider," the Mongol continued, "that—er—my duties may be quite pressing and that I might find it difficult to spare the time to devote to searching for your—*muleteer?*"

"But surely," Trent parleyed, "in return for the service I can render, you will find it convenient to spare time enough to repay me?"

Hsien Sgam's eyes contemplated the surface of the table; his fingers worked with nervous energy.

"Suppose," he suggested, "even *then* I find it im-

possible to respond to a suggestion that under other conditions and at another time would be welcome. What then?"

"Then," answered Trent, "I should call the compromise a failure."

Silence. Presently Hsien Sgam spoke:

"Let us cast aside pretenses," he said in his quiet, restrained manner. "You have brought—I hesitate to say it—war into my camp, so to speak, and you expect me to accept the first terms that are offered." He linked his hands together. "That is impossible, Mr. Tavernake." He rose. There was a queer majesty about him. "Nor do I think it wise for you to resort to—to crude enforcements such as you now contemplate." He smiled with self-assurance. "Consider the results. You would not gain your objective; you would be acting as did the man in your very excellent English parable about a fowl and a golden egg."

Then he lifted his hand and rapped upon the table—and almost instantly the door behind Trent opened. The Englishman did not turn, though he heard the footsteps of more than one.

"Suppose"—this suavely from the Mongol—"we declare an armistice, as it were, until to-night? It will afford me great pleasure to offer you the hospitality of my residence and thus eliminate the inconvenience of riding back to your house in the midday sun. At eight o'clock to-night we will dine—is not that the conventional European hour?—at which time we can discuss a

compromise. Also the duties which you shall assume in Shingtse-lunpo."

He spoke a few words in what Trent imagined was Tibetan to those standing behind the Englishman. Then he addressed Trent again.

"Shall I be presuming if I suggest that you give into my keeping that which you have under your robe?" He smiled. "You see, not being familiar with the customs of my country, you are not aware that it is considered an act of discourtesy for a guest to keep any sort of firearm during a visit, no matter how brief. You will forgive me for assuming the rôle of instructor?"

Trent drew the revolver from beneath his garments; passed it to Hsien Sgam. The latter accepted it with the air of one receiving a token of surrender. He bowed slightly.

"Now you will accompany my servants to the guest chamber, which I trust you will find comfortable, although it is not quite up to the standard of those of your very modern country."

Trent turned. Two soldiers, each armed with ancient-looking jewelled pistols, were standing just within the doorway. He left the room between the guards.

2

To a room on the second story of the Governor's residence Trent was taken. An iron door shut with strident clangor behind him. He saw neither lock nor bolt as he entered, and, after waiting for several mo-

ments, he tried the door, a purely perfunctory act. To his surprise it swung back—and showed him, in the corridor-gloom, two mailed, armed soldiers. This was the first eye-proof of captivity.

Trent closed the door and delivered his attention to the room. It was large and of stone, and gory frescoes were painted upon the wall-panels. There were two windows, each barred and offering a view of the city—a waste of terraced white, almost blinding in the sunlight, crowned by the monastery and its golden roofs. Trent peered out of one window, then the other. Both looked down upon a wide roadway. For a moment he gazed at the few monks and soldiers that came and went below, then moved to a bench fixed against the wall and sank heavily, with the uncertain air of a drunken man, upon the red cushions. There was the same suggestion of intoxication in his eyes, which were veined with red from loss of sleep.

He removed his mushroom-shaped hat and furrowed his black-dyed hair. His was the despair of a gambler who has plunged, who perceives defeat for himself in the first hand and after that plays without hope, with only the will to hope.

Like something remote and beyond reach, something dim as a dream, was the thought of Dana Charteris. His interview with Hsien Sgam drove out the mystery surrounding her abduction, but left an infinitude of apprehensions. The purpose that actuated the Mongol to such a move was not obscure. Yet if she were a hostage, he need not fear for her safety—for the present.

Eight o'clock—much hinged on that. What would the Mongol demand?

A deeper tide of thoughts brought to focus interests other than personal. If Sarojini Nanjee succeeded in her venture, she would be waiting at the Great Magician's Gate at the appointed time. And if he was still a prisoner then? But, even if he succeeded in freeing himself, he could not go without Dana Charteris. Nor could he abandon Kerth. . . . . Knotted cords, and apparently no loose ends with which to work. His only foil was the fact that he held the secret of Na-chung's whereabouts—a slim weapon with which to fight a more cunningly armed opponent.

Kerth. Where was Kerth now? In Lhakang-gompa? How could he get word to him? Bribe the soldiers? He dared not try; his message might fall into Hsien Sgam's hands and thus destroy Kerth's chances. . . . . But he did not know where to reach Kerth—a difficulty he had entirely overlooked.

He rose, and his eyes wandered about the room. As a matter of course, he tried the bars of the windows. His efforts led only to a fuller realization of his plight. Taken without violence, in a room with an unlocked door, he was as securely confined as though he were chained and in a dungeon.

He returned to the bench to wait—wait for eight o'clock. As the minutes dragged by his nerves underwent a gradual disintegration. Anxiety, mental and physical weariness—they were the destroying forces. He walked the floor. . . . . It was exquisite torture,

this waiting; something inquisitional about it. He fled from it, in thoughts, to Dana Charteris, as a persecuted worshipper to the healing coolness and quiet of temple corridors. . . . .

Sunlight ceased to reflect its glare upon the white-washed houses, and the gilded roofs of Lhakang-gompa floated in the gathering twilight like islands on a dusky sea. A rosy light spread above the city, above the towering lamasery, and deepened from pink to sullen red, like the flaming promise of an angry Stromboli. There was something sinisterly significant—a devil's symbol—in the sunset; thrice significant to Trent as he paced his prison and watched the crimson dye staining the city. For what seemed little more than a moment Shingtse-lunpo swam in the wine-light as in blood; then night touched sun-scorched walls with soothing hands and drew a veil of secrecy over the sprawling mass of houses.

As the luminous hands of Trent's watch approached eight o'clock he heard sounds outside his door—footsteps and muffled tones. Figuratively, he gave himself into the hands of his kismet.

The door opened. Polished armor shone in the dimly lighted hall. A hand beckoned to him. Between armed soldiers he left the room and descended to the lower floor.

Hsien Sgam, in his robes of office, stood waiting in the scarlet chamber where he had received Trent that morning; and his greeting,—the quintessence of irony

—his quiet, self-assured smile, made Trent falter in his diplomatic resolution to sheathe his antagonism.

One of the soldiers drew aside a scarlet curtain, revealing an arched doorway and, beyond, a long, dim hall. There a table was set. Tapers in a European candelabrum threw flickering light upon European silverware.

"You will observe," said Hsien Sgam, with a wave of his slender hand, "that I have been educated to your manner of eating. I generally relapse into barbarism, but this is an occasion—a celebration, as it were, in honor of the arrival of the first Englishman in Shingtse-lunpo."

Hsien Sgam sat across the table from Trent, and behind him—grim reminders of his power—stood two soldiers, one on either side of the scarlet-curtained archway. It was clear that the Mongol was not a gambler. . . . . Three Tibetan women, their faces smeared with kutch, served. There was little pretense at conversation, and the trying mockery of the meal was half over before Hsien Sgam broke the prolonged strain.

"Let us not be deceived," he began, "but understand each other at the very start; let us, as you would say, commence with clean slates." He smiled over a cup of tea—tea brewed in the English fashion, and not the sickening gruel that masquerades under that name in Tibet. "As you have probably guessed, I know you are not he who the very beautiful Sarojini

Nanjee would have me believe you—one Tavernake, a jeweller—but Major Trent—er—Major Arnold Ralph Trent, R. A. M. C., I believe is the full title, working in the interests of those who would commit the lamentable mistake of interfering with the affairs of others."

The Mongol continued to smile. "Furthermore, let it be understood that the fact that I know this does not in the least prejudice me against you. That one is blind is not his own fault. To enlighten you, to give you true sight—that is my purpose."

Trent met Hsien Sgam's gaze with unwavering eyes.

"At one time you were prejudiced," he suggested pointedly.

The smile seemed painted immortally upon the Mongol's bronze face. He nodded slightly.

"You refer, I presume, to the incident at Rangoon—when I came near committing a grave error? For the while I was deluded into believing it would be wiser for you not to continue to Shingtse-lunpo; I now see that I was wrong. I crave your forgiveness for that—er—almost indiscretion."

Once more the grim humor of the situation, the grotesquery of it, became apparent to Trent. This anomaly of a creature! Eternally the two elements of his being seemed warring—the Lucifer and the Buddha.

"Perhaps you will understand more clearly," said Hsien Sgam, "if I go back into the years—the years of the locust, your Christian Bible calls them. . . . .

You will forgive the fact that I am personal. It is necessary."

He spoke to one of the serving-women and she disappeared behind a curtain, to return a moment later with a silver tray. Trent almost laughed aloud; perhaps it was the tension. . . . . Cigarettes! . . . . He welcomed the smoke; it would clear his brain. Both he and the Mongol lighted their cheroots in a candle-flame. The latter's face seemed to swim in the blue clouds, his woman's-mouth twisted into that persistent, graven smile.

"I am an experiment," Hsien Sgam commenced. "Whether a success or a failure, I will let you judge. It is the custom in Mongolia to deliver one child from every family to the lamas for monastic training. I was chosen from a group of four brothers and destined from birth for holy orders. Very early—so early that I cannot quite remember it—I was given into the charge of the abbot of a monastery at Urga. I was a—I believe 'acolyte' is your word for it. When I was fourteen there was a celebration at Urga; it is called the Ts'am Haren. During the races I was injured; my pony fell on my limb. I was ill for many days. When I grew better they told me I would be lame, always. . . . . That very night my mother had a vision: she saw me harnessed in golden mail and upon a white horse, leading a great army. I was on a mountain-top, she said, with legions about me, on the slopes and in the valleys; and at my feet was Asia. She saw a flame, with the face of Timur the Lame in

it, descend into my body. Thus the soul of the great conqueror came to rest in the body of her second born."

The smile had faded from Hsien Sgam's face; there was in his eyes a glow that hid the devil-light. All the beauty of Buddha shone upon the bronze features.

"That was how I became a—what is the word?—messiah?" He went on: "A conference of the princes was held in the palace of the Hut'ukt'u, and it was proposed that I be sent to acquire the learning of the white lords. The Hut'ukt'u opposed it, for he was afraid that eventually I would have more power than he. But in the night I was taken away, by swiftest camel, and with the treasure of my house in goatskin bags. My mother accompanied me to Kalgan, then turned back—but my father went on to Peking. The Manchu woman was on the throne at the time. She had heard that a Mongol prince was being sent away to be educated in Western schools and return and establish an independent empire, and she, like the Hut'ukt'u, was afraid. She sent assassins. I escaped —but my father . . . ."

He shrugged; smiled. The shining look went from his face; his beauty was again that of Lucifer, the fallen angel.

"So I went. I studied after the manner of Englishmen. . . . . I wonder"—he leaned across the table toward Trent—"I wonder if you can understand my feelings there, a boy, in an alien land? Gray buildings and rushing trains and electricity—the roar of a modern Babylon—after yoürts and camels and

candlelight! There where men denounce polygamy and encourage prostitution!

"It was a slow death to me, a numbness that commenced in my limbs and rose up—up—until it touched the very source of my thinking. Your Civilization with its civilized vices plucked something vital, something unexplainable, from me. . . . . But I stayed; I learned; and when I had finished, I returned. But not as he who had left—who had wept when his father fell under the blade of a Manchu assassin. I had gone as the dreamer; I came back as the awakened sleeper, incensed toward those who had replaced visions with sordid reality. . . . . That was in the year that Christian calendars call nineteen hundred and four—the year Tubdan Gyatso, the Dalai Lama, forsook Lhassa."

Their cheroots had burned out. The scent of stale tobacco hung in the air like an unclean aura. To Trent it seemed the essence of Hsien Sgam's story—his tragedy.

"The Dalai Lama came to Urga," Hsien Sgam continued. "The Hut'ukt'u was jealous of him and he made his stay as unpleasant as possible. But before the Dalai Lama left, I spent many hours with him. Our cause was progressing slowly when the revolution against the Manchus came; then Yuan Shih-kai, and the restoration of Tubdan Gyatso. But the Church had lost much power. A conference was called at Lhassa and it was decided that a new Head be formed—an invisible Head, unknown to the English and other aggressors. Shingtse-lunpo was chosen. It became the

Head of the Church—a sort of Vatican. It was the will of Gaudama Siddartha that a certain Grand Lama's body should be the vessel for his spirit. Thus came the title of Sâkya-mûni to His Holiness Lobsang Yshe Naktsang, the Supreme Lama of the Gelugpa. It was also deemed advisable by the Council of Lamas that I should go to the new monastery of the Head and be invested with the power of Governor of the city. I was to be a—er—connecting link between Tibet and Mongolia.

"Dorjieff, the Buriat monk, had promised us the aid of Russia. Frequently, before the invasion of Lhassa, he acted as an intermediary between the Czar and the Dalai Lama, and on one occasion the Russian emperor sent Tubdan Gyatso the vestments of a—how is it called?—a bishop?—of the Russian church. But the Russian monarch fell in the war, and hope of Russian aid dwindled. China was strangling Mongolia; Tibet had asserted her rights. Then came the Kiachta Convention. We thought we had won. But the Hut'ukt'u is a coward. With Semenov on one side, threatening, and Japan on the other (it developed later that both were the same), he became frightened. . . . . You know what happened."

Hsien Sgam passed cigarettes to Trent, who refused; selected one himself; lighted it.

"It appeared that we were facing defeat," he resumed. "We had no money—perhaps a little in the treasuries, but not enough to propagate our plans. It seemed imminent that Japan would build the Kalgan-

Kiachta railway, and such a thing would mean the end of the dream of a Mongol empire. . . . . Ah, these railways! Keys to power! French—er—capital is behind the Chinese-Eastern Railway. Also the Yunnan Railways. The South Manchurian and the Shantung railways are Japanese-controlled. Chinese sovereignty in the districts where there are foreign-owned railways is a mere word.

"Thus it would be in Mongolia, if the Kalgan-Kiachta railway were built by Japanese money. But how could it be stopped? Mongolia herself had no money. The only way was, as I once told you, through revolution. Establish Mongolian control and refuse a concession to any power to construct the rail line. And that way, too, was obstructed by lack of—er—funds. . . . . Then the gods sent an answer to our prayers in the form of a foreigner—a man whom you know by the name of André Chavigny."

The muscles of Trent's jaw moved perceptibly at this announcement; otherwise, he sat motionless, hands grasping the edge of the table, eyes upon Hsien Sgam.

"There was a very great disturbance in Lhakanggompa," the Mongol pressed on, "when it was reported one day that a white man had been discovered—er—masquerading in the city. His Holiness charged me to interview the prisoner and ascertain how much he had learned. This I did, and you may imagine my amazement upon discovering that this white man was the André Chavigny of whom I had heard in Europe.

"His true purpose in Shingtse-lunpo I have never

learned from his lips, but I am of the opinion that he might have been deluded by fantastic tales of jewels and wealth in the vaults of Lhakang-gompa. He knew he had seen too much to be allowed to leave; that is why he made me a most amazing—er—proposition. I believe I can recall the very words he uttered. He said: 'I have heard of your plans for a revolt against China. Give me my life and I will finance you.' "

Hsien Sgam laughed—a low, soft sound.

"Conceive the situation, major: this adventuring Frenchman, with only a few *tengas,* offering to finance the revolution! It was—do you say, *droll?* But I listened to him. In this very room we talked, and he sat where you are sitting now. He has a tongue as of satin. He talked for his life that night, and what he told me amazed me. I did not believe it could be done at first. I told him so, and sent him to the guest chamber which you occupied, while I thought and thought. . . . . I went out on the city-walls. I looked toward Mongolia—Mongolia dying—and I realized that this André Chavigny should live."

The serving-women had disappeared; Trent and the Mongol were alone but for the two mailed sentinels at the doorway.

"It is not difficult for you to imagine what André Chavigny told me," said Hsien Sgam. "Before venturing into Tibet he had been in India—had visited the cities of Baroda, Indore, Gwalior. . . . He had seen jewels worth many millions of English pounds. He had seen and planned—only planned. Of those gems

he told me—of his plan, too. He had observed, he said, the monks of Shingtse-lunpo cutting coral and turquoise ornaments; therefore, why could not they, under the proper direction, re-cut and re-set diamonds and emeralds and rubies? He knew of a market—*sub rosa* is the expression he used. And for a certain—er—percentage—he offered to finance the revolution.

"I presented the plan to His Holiness—with my approval—and after hours of contemplation he announced that the gods had sanctioned his consent. So the Order of the Falcon was formed—the Falcon, whose speedy wings would enable him to defeat the Japanese Black Dragon.

"When all arrangements were completed, André Chavigny and I, with a few associates, set out for India—through Burma, as you came here. André Chavingy went to Indore, I to Jehelumpore, other members of the Order to Baroda, Gwalior, Alwar, Jodpur, Tanjore, Bahawalpur and Mysore. Meanwhile, the abbot of Tsagan-dhuka was journeying with a band of pilgrims to the Sacred Bo-tree at Buddh-Gaya.

"In the work which I had to do at Jehelumpore it became necessary for me to cultivate some one who had —*entrée,* the French say—who had *entrée* into the Nawab's palace. The gods decreed that it should be Sarojini Nanjee. I met her. And to me, for the first time, came love of woman."

Hsien Sgam's smile underwent a metamorphosis—became the smile of one who tastes the gall of a bitter memory. Again, as on that night on the *Manchester,*

Trent felt the heat of his words—words drawn from the vortices of emotion.

"I tell you this," explained the Mongol, "a thing I have told no man, so that you may fully understand. . . . . *Shinje!* How I loved! I was the monk awakened to the world: desiring, as a man who sees a spring in the desert thirsts—blindly, extravagantly. . . . . I told her of my dream of empire; I offered her a throne, and she consented to come to Tibet. Thus Sarojini Nanjee became a member of the Order of the Falcon —and my betrothed.

"Then came the night of June the fourteenth. You, as well as the English police, wondered how the jewels were removed when every border, every means of egress, was guarded. It was not difficult; it merely necessitated extreme caution. The day following the disappearance of the gems a *coffin* left each of the cities, accompanied by some—er—'relative' of the 'deceased.' These"—his smile expanded—"were delivered to the Abbot of Tsagan-dhuka and his lamas. After that, it was very simple. The jewels went with the pilgrims to Darjeeling. Then—" He gestured expressively.

A pause followed. Before Hsien Sgam took up his narrative he pressed his nearly burnt-out cigarette into a bowl—stared at the ashes as though each gray fleck was the dust of a dream.

"I was in Delhi when I first heard of you—and that Sarojini Nanjee had betrayed me. . . . . Betrayed by

the woman I loved! . . . . At first I was puzzled as to how to meet this situation—that is, your entrance into our sphere of activities; whether to—to do away with you, or allow you to continue until a later time. I decided upon the latter course, for it suddenly occurred to me that you, being a military man, might be —er—persuaded to direct your efforts into another channel. A servant of mine in the employ of Sarojini Nanjee—a man named Chandra Lal—kept me acquainted with your every move. Thus I was able to take the same boat as you and to realize I had been wise in assuming you might prove of more value alive than . . . . otherwise. In Rangoon I suffered a moment of indecision, and almost defeated my original purpose. By what happened I saw that the gods disapproved of my—er—quenching the vital spark, as the Kanjur says.

"I ordered your presence at the festival yesterday because I wished you to see how we dispose of traitors. The men who died were members of the Order who committed grave—er—errors. . . . And speaking of errors reminds me to acquaint you with the fate which you would have met to-night had not I intervened."

He rose and limped across the room, halting at a window whose draperies were drawn. He faced Trent.

"I am informed that Sarojini Nanjee, with the aid of the Great Magician, penetrated through the old passage into the Armory," he declared quietly, "and

that she plans to leave the city to-night—with you. I am also told that she has led you to believe that you will travel to India—while she secretly conspires to have you murdered after leaving Shingtse-lunpo. This is for a twofold purpose, I understand. She wishes to rid herself of your presence, so she may continue with the jewels to Chinese Turkestan; and the other reason. . . . . Well, I—er—believe there is an old wrong which she wishes to avenge. Last night a messenger left for India, with instructions from her to report to your Government that you have fled across Tibet, presumably to Mongolia, with the jewels—that you ran amuck, as it were."

He parted the window-draperies with one hand, motioning to Trent with the other. The Englishman got to his feet and joined him.

"Observe those men," Hsien Sgam directed, indicating a group of soldiers in the courtyard. "Within an hour they start for the ruined gateway of the old fortifications on the edge of the marsh, outside the city. Sarojini Nanjee must pass these ruins if she leaves Shingtse-lunpo, as the road from the Great Magician's Gate leads directly to the old gateway. There my men will wait. They have specific orders what to do. . . . . Sarojini Nanjee will attend to the Great Magician and thus relieve me of that task."

The curtain dropped into place. Trent was struggling with insurgent thoughts. . . . . Sarojini Nanjee —eleven o'clock . . . . Kerth . . . . Where was he—and Dana Charteris? . . . . He sorted from the many

incoherences a question that had been trembling on his tongue for the past half hour.

"What of Chavigny?" he asked.

"Chavigny?" Hsien Sgam repeated. "You will meet Chavigny before many hours."

Trent was possessed of a mad desire to laugh. Who was telling the truth, Sarojini Nanjee or Hsien Sgam? . . . . Chavigny, the celebrated Chavigny!

"As I told you one night on shipboard," he heard the Mongol saying, "our troops are good fighters, but untrained. They need a competent leader—a tactician. Organization; training. Those are the necessary elements. And they must be taught with the technique of modern warfare, by some one who understands the mechanism of a great unit of men. If you will accept that post, your title will be that of Commanding General. From Shingtse-lunpo you will go into Inner Mongolia, where preparations are under way to launch a big offensive. We have already taken a few strides. On the fifth of this month Urga was captured and Ungern's 'White Guards' defeated. But without organized force all this work will have been accomplished for nothing. . . . . You will be well repaid for your services. When I am Emperor of Mongolia I shall not forget."

Trent's aggressive jaw was shot forward; but for that his expression was unchanged.

"You seem to forget I am an Englishman," he reminded.

Hsien Sgam merely smiled. "Men have lost their

identities before. Sarojini Nanjee's messenger is on his way to India. That will account for your absence to the Government."

Trent looked almost amused. "A sort of birthright-for-a-mess-of-pottage affair, is n't it?"

"I do not comprehend"—thus the Mongol.

Trent did not try to explain. He queried: "What if I prefer to do otherwise than as you suggest?"

"I am prepared against such a decision." That lurking smile returned. "Na-chung, who is a very wise councillor, suspected that your *muleteer* was—er—not as you represented him—or, I should say, *her*. I ordered an investigation. . . . . That you were accompanied by a woman, evidently one to whom you are—er—attached, was all I could have wished for. . . . . I acted. She has not been molested; nor will she be, if you accept the terms which I have offered."

Trent's nails dug fiercely into his palms. It was with an effort that he kept his face in an expressionless mold.

"And if I agree?"

"She will be returned to India, unharmed and with the proper escort."

"How can I be sure of that?"

"She will write to you from Darjeeling."

"You forget the councillor, Na-chung."

"We shall find him," Hsien Sgam stated confidently.

"Dead," Trent added. "He is hidden—hidden where you 'll not easily find him. My muleteers are there—with instructions—and if they have not heard

from me by midnight, they 'll put an end to Nachung."

Hsien Sgam continued to smile. "You will countermand that order," he said evenly.

"No," declared Trent, quite as evenly.

They faced each other for a space of seconds, neither speaking. Then the Mongol announced:

"If he is murdered, you will be charged with it and properly punished"—he paused and finished effectively —"*after* you have done the work which I intend you shall do. Otherwise, at the conclusion of the period of service you are free."

A reckless impulse stormed the battlement of Trent's control. Hsien Sgam seemed to sense it, for he spoke up.

"Consider well, major. One pays for a moment's folly in the coin of years."

What passed in Trent's mind the next few moments no man ever knew; it is doubtful if even Trent himself remembered afterward. His thoughts were laved in poison. . . . He felt something of purgatorial fire—a burning of brain and nerves. But in the heat was a sphere of starry luster—a face, alone cool and composed in the midst of what seemed some terrific volcanic disorder of the body. It was this luster that led him at length to a decision.

"There 's no alternative." He heard his voice in a queer, separated manner. "When I have proof that Miss Charteris has reached India, I will do as you demand . . . . but . . . ."

"But if you have the opportunity," Hsien Sgam cut in, linking his slender fingers and smiling, "you will furnish me with a passport to that—er—sulphurous dominion which your Christian Bible threatens. Be assured, major, I shall guard against any such—er—personal catastrophe."

Then he spoke to one of the soldiers, who immediately left the room. He turned back to Trent.

"We will go now—this very moment—to His Holiness, and—er—draw up the contract, so to speak, in his auspicious presence. This visit to Lhakang-gompa will serve a double purpose, for at the same time I shall initiate you into the mysteries of *'Thatsang,'* or 'Falcon's Nest,' as you would say it—the room where the Falcon planned the recent activities in India. It will be necessary for you to ride to the monastery; therefore, I must have your word of honor not to—er—commit any act of violence that might force me to adopt an abortive policy."

The soldier reappeared, holding aside the scarlet curtains.

"You will precede me," directed Hsien Sgam, with a polite wave of his hand, evidently enjoying the exquisite satire of the situation.

Trent moved into the scarlet audience-chamber, followed by his Transparency the Governor of Shingtse-lunpo and his mailed bodyguard.

3

To Trent there was grim irony in that ride to Lha-

kang-gompa. Hsien Sgam's vermilion-lacquered sedan-chair swayed along at his side, and in front and rear was a file of leather-helmeted men. In a courtyard of the great building (they rode up a stone causeway to reach it) the Mongol left his sedan-chair and Trent dismounted. One of the soldiers took the lead, Trent walking next, with Hsien Sgam and the other guards in the rear—a formation whose strategic points the Englishman did not fail to perceive.

With their entrance into the lower halls of Lhakang-gompa the usual smell of incense and putridity, a combination of odors peculiarly Tibetan, assaulted their nostrils and clung as they climbed staircase after staircase; as they plunged along lamp-lit corridors where lamas moved like wraiths in the dimness; crossed courts and roofs, glimpsing the stars and the white flame of a rising moon; and even when they reached a heavily-carpeted, crimson-walled apartment that Hsien Sgam informed Trent was the first ante-chamber of Sâkya-mûni's audience hall. A large room, this, and occupied by several lamas who sat at pearl-inlaid tables—chamberlains of the Yellow Pontiff. To one of these cardinals Hsien Sgam spoke, and the former parted lacquered sliding-doors and disappeared.

"I am told that His Holiness has been indisposed to-day," Hsien Sgam explained to Trent, "and has refused to see anyone, even his attendant cardinals. However, the *Donyer-chenpo* has gone to see if he will grant us an audience."

Trent showed little interest as they waited—but the

pulse in his throat was throbbing hotly. He watched with expressionless eyes the lacquered doors from behind which the *Donyer-chenpo,* or chamberlain, would reappear. And at length the cardinal came. The doors parted and he stepped out, motioning to Hsien Sgam. The latter moved forward and held a short conversation with the prelate, then nodded to Trent, who, with the soldiers at his heels, joined them.

"His Holiness has consented to see us"—this briefly from the Mongol.

Beyond the lacquered doors was a stairway that took them into a chamber similar to the one they had left. Two lamas were the only occupants, one on either side of a great door covered with cerise and gold brocade and ornamented with knobs of gold filagree. Here they exchanged their shoes for soft black slippers, and here they left the soldiers.

The *Donyer-chenpo* pushed back the great door. They entered. Trent was confused by darkness; then came a swishing sound, and a thin line of light broadened into a triangle as draperies were pulled aside.

The first impression, due to the vastness of the audience hall and the dim glow of the butter-lamps, was one of space and gloom and mystery. A double line of pillars strove toward a chain-spanned impluvium through which stars were visible, and along the walls were idols and holy vessels—brazen bowls and cymbals and incense-burners. Toward the rear, at the end of the avenue of columns, was a raised portion of the floor, covered with yellow silks. There, beneath a can-

opy and seated upon a throne whose arms were carved lions, attended by the *Kuchar Khanpo* and the *Solen-chenpo*—state officials—was his Holiness, Sâkya-mûni, the Grand Lama of Tibet. He wore the yellow mitre, yellow veil and yellow vestments that Trent had seen at the Festival of the Gods, and his slim hands rested motionless, as though wrought of bronze, upon the carved lions of the throne.

Hsien Sgam bowed low, whispering to Trent to do the same. As the latter drew erect he saw that the *Donyer-chenpo* had disappeared; the following instant he heard the muffled sound of a closing door behind him.

Meanwhile, Sâkya-mûni motioned them forward, his yellow mitre nodding.

"His Holiness means for us to be seated on the rugs below the throne-daïs," said Hsien Sgam in a hushed voice.

The two, Englishman and Mongol, took seats, cross-legged, upon the carpets before the raised portion of the floor that supported the pontifical throne. A thin voice sounded from under the veil. . . . .

"His Holiness bids you greeting," translated Hsien Sgam, "and prays that the blessing of the Three Konchog be upon you. In return, I shall give him your"—the shadow of a smile slid across the oblique eyes—"your—er—felicitations."

The two yellow-robed attendants then served tea in golden chalices. Sâkya-mûni did not drink his, but blessed it and passed it to the *Kuchar Khanpo*. . . . . Incense brushed Trent's face, like a tangible touch.

. . . . The ceremony of tea-drinking over, he waited restlessly for the next move.

The Grand Lama spoke in his thin voice to the attendants, who backed to a corridor at one side of the audience-hall and vanished, leaving Trent and Hsien Sgam alone with the Living Buddha. . . . . Sâkya-mûni was murmuring to himself—reciting a *mantra,* Trent imagined. There was something checked and imminent in the solemn quiet. . . . .

Suddenly Sâkya-mûni ceased murmuring. He lifted one hand. Immediately Hsien Sgam got to his feet, instructing Trent to do the same. The Grand Lama rose, his yellow vestments shimmering faintly in the cathedral-dusk. He spoke. Trent, who was watching the Mongol out of the corner of his eye, saw a look of surprise dwell for a second in the latter's face; saw Hsien Sgam produce from under his garments an object that glinted like blue steel; saw him pass it to Sâkya-mûni.

Then the reincarnation of Gaudama Siddartha removed mitre and veil with one hand (he held the glinting object in the other) and stepped down from the daïs—only it was not Sâkya-mûni who did this, but Euan Kerth in the vestments of the Lamaist pontiff; Euan Kerth, smiling his satanic smile and looking like some shaven-pated Mephistopheles.

4

The blood pulsed in Trent's temples. For once his stupefaction escaped the citadel of his impassivity.

Nor could Hsien Sgam control his amazement. The Mongol stared—stared with the air of a man struggling to grasp something beyond his ken of thought, beyond possibility.

Kerth's voice broke the spell—proof to Trent that what he saw was no sorcery of the eyes.

"I 'm not so sure our friend the Governor has no other firearms on his person. Suppose you investigate, major."

At the sound of the voice, a voice that spoke English, Hsien Sgam seemed to awaken to a realization of the situation. Surprise was replaced by a queer, half-dazed expression.

"I have been without wits," he said, more to himself than to the others. "I did not for a moment consider that there might be two—that . . . ." Words perished on his lips. His breathing was audible—the heavy breathing of one suddenly stricken. He recovered enough to ask: "His Holiness—what have you done to him? Have you—"

"It 's hardly my place to answer questions," drawled Kerth; "surely not my intention." Then: "Go ahead, major."

As Trent approached, Hsien Sgam lifted his hand.

"Am I to be forced to submit to the indignity of being searched?"

Neither Englishman answered, but Trent paused tentatively.

"If I give my word," Hsien Sgam pursued, "that I am unarmed, will not that be sufficient?"

"No weapon of any sort?"—thus Kerth, while his eyes sought Trent. The latter inclined his head slightly.

"None."

Something of the Mongol's poise and dignity had reasserted itself, and a faint, illusive smile—an almost tolerant smile—touched his woman's-mouth. His slender hands worked nervously.

"I daresay I can guess your thoughts." Kerth, who was smiling, addressed Hsien Sgam. "Your Transparency thinks I dare not use this,"—fingering the steel trigger-guard—"but in that you are mistaken. You must remember that whereas you are Governor, I am—well—" He touched the yellow vestments.

As Trent watched Hsien Sgam, an emotion almost of pity smote him. He felt the titanic conflict within the Mongol, the power—warped power—behind the Buddha-like face and the heretofore puzzling eyes (eyes that were no longer puzzling, but that mirrored the raw look of ancient evil, the bitter corrosion of disappointment); power that was facing defeat. Dream of empire, of pomp and regal splendor, rusted, as his every dream had done. . . . . An unfinished vessel, this Hsien Sgam. (Fragments of the Mongol's story played like illuminating shafts among Trent's thoughts: the boy who wept for his father—who felt the strangle-grip of a great gray Babylon—the celibate to whom the wine of love turned stale.) The gift of life to Hsien Sgam had been ashes. All this Trent saw in his eyes—eyes that stared ahead with sick contemplation.

And now Hsien Sgam moved. He clasped his lithe, feminine hands; he took a few steps, slueing upon his twisted limb; paused; stood motionless; made a gesture of resignation.

"I am defeated," he declared in his soft voice, "but you will sink with me. It is as though you had ventured into a web; the threads will tangle you, and, like flies, you will hang there and die."

Kerth smiled. "Your teeth are extracted, Transparency," he replied. He removed another revolver from under his pallium, offering it to Trent. "Major, I think we can talk with more ease if we go to my"—this with a smile—"my apartments. There are certain matters I wish to discuss with his Transparency, and I fear we might be interrupted here."

He moved around the daïs, pausing by the yellow brocade that hung behind the throne.

"Suppose I walk first, then his Transparency, then you, major. I believe that will prevent any complications."

In the rear of the daïs, concealed by yellow draperies, was a door that gave access to a stairway. Kerth took the lead, his robes dragging upon the stone steps. The stairs mounted at a steep grade, broke their ascent on three landings, and brought them into a small space, facing coral-hued curtains. As Kerth gripped the center of the hangings, preparatory to parting them, he looked around, over his shoulder and Hsien Sgam's close-cropped head, at Trent.

"Be prepared, major," he drawled. "This is '*That-*

sang' or, as we would say it, 'Falcon's Nest.'" He laughed—a low, rather grim chuckle. "You stand face to face with the secret of Lhakang-gompa."

With that he jerked the draperies apart and the clink of the metal rings from which they hung sent a slight shiver down Trent's spine. He stepped between the curtains, Hsien Sgam preceding him. He found himself in a long room. Its floor and walls were bare. At the far end, in an alcove-like space, raised and sectioned off from the rest of the apartment by a half-partition, was a bed. Yak-hair curtains partly hid it—only partly, for they did not conceal the limbs and the crimson garment of the body that lay upon the gold-fringed bed-robe.

Kerth had crossed the room. Now Trent halted at the break of the partition, Hsien Sgam at his side.

The face of the sleeper (Trent knew by the fall and rise of his breast that he was not dead) was Aryan, but the shape of the eyelids and brows suggested that the eyes, when open, were oblique. Lips thin and sensitive; features of an ascetic. The skull was high and shaven as bare as if hair had never grown upon it; a white bandage covered the right temple and sloped over the dome. . . . . Trent lifted his eyes from the pale, yellow features to Kerth, who, with a slight smile, answered the inquisitive look.

"Sâkya-mûni is the Falcon."

Trent looked down upon the wasted features; looked up again.

"He 's been unconscious since noon to-day," Kerth

explained. "This morning I attended a ceremony in the audience-hall. While I was saying a *mantra,* the idea occurred to me. . . . . I crept into one of the corridors off the hall and hid there. When the lamas had gone, Sâkya-mûni went behind the curtains in the rear of the throne, with two attendants. Soon the attendants reappeared. . . . . and I went up. Unfortunately, in the tussle he struck his head. I 'm afraid he 's done up rather badly. Take a look, major. Meanwhile, Transparency"—his eyes fastened upon the Mongol—"be seated—here."

He indicated an armchair and Hsien Sgam sat down. Trent bent over Sâkya-mûni. . . . . After several minutes he straightened up.

"It 's a bad cut, but I can't tell much without a closer examination. He has fever—pulse running up, too."

Hsien Sgam rose. "Is it quite serious, Major Trent? Do you think—"

"You will resume your seat, Transparency," ordered Kerth. The Mongol obeyed. "Now, major, tell me just what has happened to-day—and if you 've learned anything about Miss Charteris."

Trent briefly summarized the situation. Kerth nodded absently when he had finished; fingered his revolver.

"We 're a bit scattered," he commented. Then, after a pause: "Transparency, you will be good enough to say where you 've hidden Miss Charteris."

Hsien Sgam sat like a carved Buddha; even his fingers ceased their restless playing upon the arms of the chair.

"If I refuse?"

Kerth thrust forward the blue muzzle of the revolver. "There 's to be no parleying," he declared sternly, the smile gone from his face. "You 've lost. Now come through."

After a moment Hsien Sgam said:

"She is at my residence."

"Good"—this from Kerth. "Before we leave you will write an order to have her taken to whatever place we specify." Then, as though dismissing that point as settled, he went on: "Hmm . . . . Quite scattered, I 'd say: She at his house; we here; Trent's men with Nachung; Sarojini Nanjee getting ready to leave; his Transparency's soldiers hidden at the ruined gate,"—a pause—"with orders to shoot Sarojini Nanjee. . . . Hmm . . . ." Suddenly he smiled. "Excellent! . . . . What 's the hour, major?"

Trent pulled back his long sleeve. "Five to ten."

Kerth spoke to Hsien Sgam. "You will also send a guard to your men at the ruins, withdrawing them—but, no—no—won't do. Ends must meet. . . . . We can't trust a messenger. And we must let Sarojini Nanjee leave the city, as she 's planned; for she has the jewels—yet—damn!" His forehead crinkled into a frown. "Damn!" he repeated. "Ends *must* meet!"

Silence followed. Hsien Sgam did not stir. Once a faint sound, a shuddering sigh, came from the alcove-like space. Kerth was the first to speak, and his smile hinted that he had discovered a solution.

"You may not wholly approve, major," he began, "yet I see no other way. Why not go ahead and meet

Sarojini Nanjee? Meanwhile, I 'll have Miss Charteris freed, and she, in company with myself and his Transparency, can leave the city by the main gate and Amber Bridge. We 'll reach the ruined gateway before you and Sarojini pass the Great Magician's Gate, which will give his Transparency time to forestall the soldiers and send them back to the city. Then we can wait, there at the gateway, for you. Sarojini may not be particularly pleased when she learns of my presence; but if she acts up, we have his Transparency to testify that she intended to do away with an officer of the empire. That ought to simplify her case."

"What of my muleteers?" Trent queried. "And Na-chung?"

"Na-chung is n't to be considerel. As for your men—I can get word to them to meet us at the main gate. If there 's trouble we can make good use of them. Of course, there 's a risk—more for you than for me. Something might prevent us from reaching the soldiers in time, and—"

Hsien Sgam interrupted.

"You forget his Holiness. Will you leave him to die?"

"Hardly," Kerth answered. "After all that 's happened, I fancy the Viceroy will be pleased to—to *entertain* his Holiness. . . . . No, we sha'n't leave him to die. If all goes well, Major Trent and I can arrange to return to Lhakang-gompa."

"You think," said Hsien Sgam, "it will be easy to leave the city?"

Kerth made a deprecatory gesture. "That is not difficult. I shall ride in the sedan-chair of His Holiness Sâkya-mûni, and until we pass Amber Bridge your Transparency will sit beside me to prevent any interference with our plans. There you may change to a pony and ride between two of the major's muleteers. Your own palanquin will be put to good use, as Miss Charteris can occupy that. And after we leave Shingtse-lunpo, then to the South—Gyangtse—and into India."

Hsien Sgam smiled—that smile of inscrutable irony.

"You are only crawling deeper into the web," he asserted quietly. "It will fall upon you and you will go—like that—" The lithe hands spread out expressively.

Kerth coolly returned his smile. "If we 're caught, you 'll perish with us, in the same web. Threats are useless, Transparency. The scales have tilted. And your attitude does n't become a prisoner. We can carry out our plans with you or without you, although much smoother with you. Accept my ultimatum—*unconditional surrender*—or reject it."

Hsien Sgam's lips twisted into that ineffaceable smile. His quiescence was absolute.

"You understand, if I thought my—my demise would prevent you from executing your plans, I would not hesitate to—er—clog the machinery. But it would be suicide without a purpose. Therefore, I can only accept."

"Unconditionally?"

"Unconditionally."

Hsien Sgam's chin sank into his breast.

"Now, major, do you approve of my plan?" asked Kerth. "If so, we 'll go to the audience hall and I 'll order the men to take you to your residence, and his Transparency and I will despatch messengers for Miss Charteris and your muleteers."

Trent nodded.

Kerth placed the mitre upon his head and let the veil fall over his features. A blue steel eye glittered in the folds of his robes—an eye that was focussed upon Hsien Sgam.

"Come, Transparency!"

Kerth leading, they left Falcon's Nest; left it with its silence and its brooding secrets.

5

A few minutes later Kerth was seated on the throne of Sâkya-mûni (Trent and Hsien Sgam stood on the red carpets before the daïs) and reaching toward a gong that hung from one of the carved lions of the chair. Following the mellow ring, the curtains in the other end of the chamber parted to admit the *Donyer-chenpo,* who bowed and stood waiting.

The thin voice sounded from under the yellow veil—a stream of Tibetan words. Trent wondered, irrelevantly, if it was really Kerth who spoke—Kerth of the satanic smile.

And now he saw the yellow-robed figure motioning him to leave, and backed slowly to where the *Donyer-*

chenpo stood; backed between the parted draperies; and the curtains dropped, and he was in darkness.

In the first ante-chamber the *Donyer-chenpo* resumed his seat at the nacre-inlaid desk, among the other cardinals, and Trent continued with the soldiers. Back through the courts and corridors they went (each glimpse of the stars brought to Trent a sweet recollection of another lustrous pallor), and down the innumerable staircases. They emerged at length into the courtyard where the horses were waiting; mounted; rode out of Lhakang-gompa and down the causeway.

Afterward, Trent could remember no single incident of that brief ride from the lamasery; it was a panorama of moon and white walls and darkness. The bewildering events of the past few hours had left him in a state of mental confusion. The soldiers wheeled about at his gate, and he rode into the deserted quadrangle alone.

He was about to dismount when a shadow detached itself from the gloom of the garden—the garden, with its flaming hollyhocks. (Odd that he should think of flowers now!) It was the long-haired guide of the previous night. He grunted what Trent supposed was a greeting, and caught the bridle, guiding the pony back to the gate. Trent turned for a last look at the dark dwelling—the house where he first partook of the lover's eucharist. Then the Tibetan swung himself upon the pony, behind him, clamping his knees upon the beast's flanks, and Trent inhaled the reek of soiled clothing.

Through familiar streets they clattered, and over a stone bridge toward the city's ramparts. Few people

were astir; dogs prowled in the lurking shadows. The temple of the Great Magician had a ghostly semblance as they approached it; its dome was spattered with moonlight, like a huge anthill flecked with drippings of glow-paint. Something in the sight of the bulk of masonry brought to Trent's mind what Sarojini Nanjee had said. . . . .

They passed the temple. A narrow foot-path took them to the Great Magician's Gate. As on the preceding night, there was no guard. When Trent's pony was brought to a halt, the Tibetan made a gesture which Trent interpreted to mean that he should stay there and slunk away along the path to the temple. Trent glanced at his watch as the man left.

To the north, in the maze of houses that lay flat and huddled beneath the sovereign structure of Lhakang-gompa, a dog was howling. Another answered it; another took it up; and the melancholy baying wavered from roof to roof—a tuneless dirge. Irrelevantly, Trent thought of a vermilion-lacquered sedan-chair that by this time should be at the ruined gateway. It was a sheer, breathless moment, a moment detached and charged with exquisite suspense.

The rattle of harness-chains drew him back to earth. His eyes swerved to the path from the temple. After a moment, shadows took shape in the moonlight—mounts and riders. He wheeled his pony and rode to meet the caravan.

Sarojini Nanjee sat erect upon a horse at the head of a string of mules; the scent of sandalwood awakened in

him a queer alertness. She always breathed of earth-perfume—an odor of the senses. Beyond her were the looming shapes of three men—muleteers. Trent saw the contours of sacks on the pack-animals.

"Your men have left the city?" was her first question. Her breath came quickly and the black opals had been kindled in her eyes.

He answered with a nod.

She insinuated her hand into his; pressed his fingers.

"We win!" she whispered. "You and I!"

He smiled to himself, grimly. What Hsien Sgam had said was fresh in his ears. One of her men passed and opened the gate. Outside, on the embankment, she turned her mount, waiting at one side while the caravan moved out. Trent reined in his pony beside her.

"Look!" she commanded, pointing through the gate at the magnificent mass of Lhakang-gompa, above whose broken roofs the moon was poised. "Shingtse-lunpo—Lhakang-gompa—all! I hold them, like this!" And she made a gesture and laughed—that old familiar laugh that rippled low in her throat. "All is not finished! Nay! I promised you vengeance—and to-night, in a few minutes, you shall know that I keep my promises!"

Then she struck her horse in the flanks and dashed down the slope, to the head of the caravan. Trent followed. Behind, the gate closed softly and hoofs thudded in the mud of the road.

"To-night . . . . you shall know that I keep my promises!"

That rang in Trent's brain; rang and echoed and reeled away, and left him to grope for the meaning.

They rode on. Several times Sarojini Nanjee glanced over her shoulder. The ruins above the tunnel were reached, passed. Ahead the road swerved and lost itself in high rushes—rushes that swayed and sighed and shivered. Trent's hand hovered close to his revolver. The flesh over his spine crawled uncomfortably as they approached the end of the marsh-belt. He strained his eyes, but saw only the fringed line of tall reeds against the sky. . . . And now the white columns of the ruined gateway loomed, broken sentinels guarding the half-buried remains of an ancient fortification.

They were within a few yards of the gateway when, ahead, a horse whinnied.

Trent's heart leaped into his throat, and Sarojini Nanjee swiftly reined in her horse. Something gleamed in her hand.

From behind the shattered walls appeared a horseman—a robed horseman, phantom-like in the moonlight. Behind him rode another—another. They were fairly vomited through the gateway. Trent recognized Kerth at the head, Kee Meng and Hsaio behind.

The thing in Sarojini's hand coughed, and the red glare of discharged powder momentarily stained the darkness. But none of the three horsemen faltered. Before she could fire again Trent gripped her mount's bridle and dug his heels into his own pony. They plunged forward, side by side. He was almost dragged from the saddle, but he managed to remain seated—to

cling to the bridle of Sarojini's horse. When they were outside the broken gate he jerked both animals to a standstill. Melted fire-opals blazed in the woman's eyes. But he had her revolver.

"You fool!"

Vitriol was in her voice—but he heard her only in a detached way, for he saw, swimming in the moonlight behind the wall, a sedan-chair, and in it the pale oval of a face. It was in the midst of mules and packs and several mounted men. Hsien Sgam was there, in the saddle, between two muleteers. Kerth, Kee Meng and Hsiao had drawn rein in the gateway, thus separating Sarojini Nanjee from her caravan.

This, a quick negative, snapped and printed upon Trent's brain.

From him the woman's eyes moved around the group —past Kerth, past the muleteers and the sedan-chair—to Hsien Sgam.

"You did this!" Her words stung with venom, and her eyes traveled back swiftly to Trent. "Perhaps he fooled you into betraying me—*but ask him why he wanted you to believe Chavigny alive and see, then, if you want him as your ally!*"

A moment of tenseness followed—a moment that seemed to lengthen into a dead interval of time. The very world ached with dumbness, ached and waited. Hsien Sgam, who sat stooped upon his pony, was the first to speak.

"Major Trent, you wish to know who murdered your friend. Sarojini Nanjee did it. But not with her own

hand. . . .'' His words were like smooth pellets emerging from vats of molten metal. ''I loved her,'' the Mongol declared; ''loved her . . . . and I went to Gaya, to your house, when I learned of her interest in you . . . . And there I made a fatal mistake—''

His words were buried as a muffled detonation ruptured the quiet. An abrupt shock quivered the ground. Eyes swerved to the source of sound. For an infinitesimal moment the very universe seemed to hang in dreadful suspense; then came two violent throbs, like the blows of a seismic hammer. A terrific roar was born out of the womb of inter-stellar silence—a roar that smote the eardrums of those who heard, that pressed ponderously against the heart and whipped the blood into throat and nostrils and eyes.

From the towering mass of Lhakang-gompa rose a quick glare that stabbed up, sank, and with it the roofs and walls of the monastery. . . . Smoke belched upon the sky. The earth shook. The very stars seemed dim with dread, and a wraith of nebulous black veiled the face of the moon. It was as though the gigantic machinery of a planet had been suddenly crippled.

The hush that followed seemed to pluck from Trent's lungs the power to breathe. He thought the ground still heaved, that the rumbling was still pouring about his ears. . . . . He was a pigmy in the midst of some cosmic disorder. . . . . His pony snorted and trembled violently. For a space of seconds no one spoke; no one dared. All looked toward the cloud that was settling, doom-black, over what had been Lhakang-gompa,

over the seamed and broken heart of Shingtse-lunpo! . . . . And then came a soft, repressed voice—a herald of earth recalling them to its dominion after some awful furlough.

"Sarojini Nanjee is very clever. I should have known better than to oppose a woman."

A rattling laugh broke from Hsien Sgam, a laugh that was punctuated by a crash. Trent, turning, saw a rapier of corrosive flame leap from the Mongol's hand; saw it reflect hideously upon the features of Sarojini Nanjee. He sought to catch her, but she slipped from the saddle. . . . . Her face stared up at him from a pool of black hair.

Again the rattling laugh—as the muleteers lunged at Hsien Sgam; again the crash and the rapier of corrosive flame, a broken rapier, that sank its hot shaft into the Mongol's own breast. . . . . He hung limp between the muleteers, and a shining thing dropped from his hand to the ground. But his eyes were open. Trent saw them; Kerth, who had dismounted, saw them.

"I regret that I killed your friend, Major Trent"—the Mongol spoke in a stricken voice—"I regret, too, that I was forced to close the lips of a native who appeared at an inopportune time. It is unpardonable, major, that I stabbed this Captain Manlove—instead—of you."

Then he swayed; fell forward upon the neck of his mount. He was still alive when Trent reached him, but the Buddha-like face seemed shrunken and the oblique eyes, revealed by the searching brilliance of the moon-

light, were half closed with pain. He smiled in a twisted, grotesque manner.

"Mysteries are exquisite things, major," he whispered. "Consider how delightful it—it will be, in years to come, to—to wonder whether Chavigny . . . . ah, *Shinje!* . . . . whether he was killed in Delhi, as Sarojini claims, or died in—in Lhakang-gompa; and to wonder if she really meant to—to murder you, or if I—I lied—" He laughed softly. "You have heard of the scorpion, major, who, surrounded, stings himself to death. . . . ."

They had to lift him from the pony, and Trent, looking down upon the huddled body, knew it did not belong to the boy who went forth from Mongolia with the dream of a messiah shining in his heart.

CHAPTER XIV

GYANGTSE

LATE afternoon of the seventeenth day, and ahead, against the brazen furnace of the sunset, the battlements of Gyangtse. Trent straightened up in his saddle as he saw the town rise above the ochre hills. Gyangtse! From there the Chumbi Valley, the passes of Sikkhim, and down into tropical India! But Gyangtse meant more than that to him. . . . . Like the frail filament of a dream was the memory of the journey from Shingtse-lunpo—dust and bitter winds; smoke of campfires in the nostrils; and in his heart a cavernous doubt. It was this doubt that fed upon his nerve-tissues, not the travel. And Gyangtse meant that it would end. He would be lifted to lofty spheres, or. . . .

Now, as the town unfolded in the sunset, he looked at Dana Charteris, who rode near him—rode in silence, staring ahead. (Thus she had ridden for those seventeen days—in silence and staring ahead, a wintry coolness freezing the warmth from her eyes.) Tears trembled upon her lashes.

The road took them under a bastion and toward the gate. When they were yet some distance away a uniformed figure, mounted and followed by turbaned Gurkhas, clattered out to meet them.

351 92

"Cavendish! The District Agent!"

Kerth, who was riding ahead with the muleteers and the grain-sacks, called back these words to Trent and the girl.

The uniformed figure had drawn up—a tanned young man, with the mark of a helmet-strap running across each cheek and a lonely hungering in his eyes. He was laughing and shaking hands with Trent; then he touched his helmet as he saw Dana Charteris.

They were guided into a compound where marigolds kindled a warmth against white walls. Servants with weathered, smiling faces appeared from the house, sticking out their tongues in greeting.

But Trent found a poignant sharpness in this welcome, for the winter-light in the eyes of Dana Charteris had chilled him to the soul.

2

A bath in a collapsible canvas tub; clean clothing; dinner in a high-ceilinged, cool room; and, afterward, Trent, Kerth and the young Agent talking, over cigars.

Dana Charteris had slipped away soon after the meal, and the room seemed barren to Trent. He scarcely heard his two companions, and sat nervously fingering the arm of the chair and blowing smoke into the air. When he could no longer endure it he begged to be excused and went to the room assigned to him, where he got from his pack a certain object and thrust it into his pocket.

In the compound he encountered a Gurkha. . . . Yes,

he had seen the memsahib, the soldier replied; he heard her order one of the sahib's muleteers to saddle her pony and she went toward Pal-khor Choide.

Trent followed.

He had passed the crimson walls of the lamasery before he saw her—a slender shadow ahead in the dusk. He urged his pony into a canter, and presently slackened pace beside her. She had not turned, but now the brown eyes were directed upon him and he felt a polar coldness in the look. For a moment his voice refused to answer his summons.

"Dana—" he faltered. "Why did you run away, like this?"

She smiled—not the smile he knew, that awakened a golden memory of autumn forests and cathedral spaces.

"I wanted to be alone. Why did you follow?"

From his pocket he drew a glinting bracelet. In the dusk she saw the cobra-head lifted in bizarre relief. It seemed to strike into her heart.

"To give you this;"—his voice was low, trembling—"to tell you that I cannot be your—your bracelet-brother longer." He seemed to drink courage from those first words and plunged ahead. "Back there in Burma, at the jungle camp, I promised myself that until we reached civilization I 'd remain the—the brother; and now. . . ." He extended the bracelet. "Won't you accept it?"

The winter-light faded suddenly from her eyes; they shone with a new illumination. With its coming, the

chill in his heart thawed; the early night was aromatic and healing. (Overhead a few stars were caught in the gauzy dusk, like dewdrops in a web.) Her fingers closed about the bracelet.

"I 've been so foolish!" she whispered, in a choked voice. "Oh, so childish and small—while you 've been big and fine and strong. Arnold Trent, forgive me! I thought because—because you did n't speak; because you did n't tell me of what I saw in your eyes—back there in Burma—that, like *Sentimental Tommy,* the glamour tarnished when you touch it—that you were just—play-acting—and, because the adventure was over, you—you . . . ." She swallowed, then finished: "Oh, I 've been such a foolish *Grizel!*"

. . . . When they rode back into Gyangtse the distant, purple-black spurs of the Himalayas were swimming in the pallid luster poured from a flagon moon.

3

Serpents of tobacco smoke writhed in the room where Euan Kerth and the young District Agent had been talking since dinner; spiraled about the two tanned faces and dissolved, as if by magic, leaving a thin grayish haze.

. . . . "If anyone else had told me that, Euan Kerth," said the young officer, breaking a long silence, "I would n't believe it! . . . . And they 're in those sacks! No wonder you wanted a dozen Gurkhas to guard 'em! Gad! Of course I 'll lend you an escort! Why, if it

were learned that we had 'em, here in this house, we 'd be murdered before midnight! But go on, man, finish your story."

Kerth resumed. The golden roofs of Lhakang-gompa lived in his words; Shingtse-lunpo, with its maze of white-washed houses. Another long silence followed when he finished. The serpents of smoke still crawled and lolled in the air. Cavendish spoke.

"Kerth, I wonder—" He broke off; the lonely hungering in his eyes was clouded by an expression of bewilderment. He cleared his throat; laughed. "Of course, it can't be so, but . . . . Well, about six months ago an old lama was sick in the Jong. They brought him to me, on a litter, just before he died—at his request. He told me something queer. He said that Lhassa was no longer the political center of Tibet, and that the man in the Potala was not the Dalai Lama, but a priest posing as the Dalai Lama. He said the real Dalai Lama was in another monastery—somewhere toward Mongolia—that there . . . ." Again he broke off; laughed. "But of course there can't be anything to it."

And Euan Kerth, his face dimmed by the smoke from his cheroot, smiled his satanic smile.

"No, of course," he repeated, "there can't be anything to it."

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